

**India-Iran Strategic and Economic Relations
(1991-2022)**

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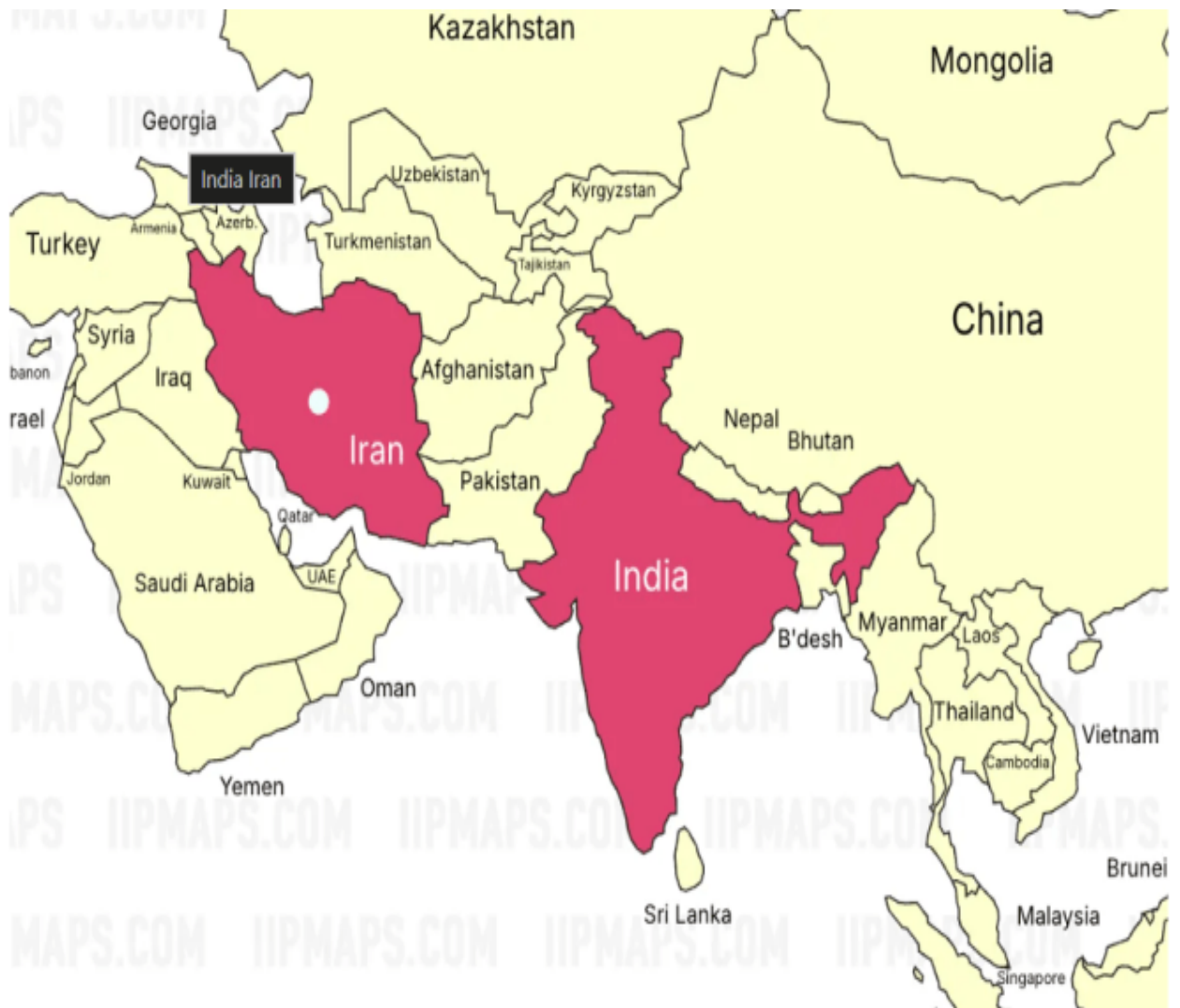
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CERTIFIED THAT THE THESIS ENTITLED

India-Iran Strategic and Economic Relations (1991-2022) Submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of **Dr. Arup Bhattacharyya** (Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University) and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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To My Beloved Parents

Eerfan Ali Mollick

May he rest in eternal Paradise

and

Zademan Nesha

May she rest in eternal Paradise

**Whose love, sacrifice, and dedication
shaped me, as I am today.**

**Though you are no longer with us,
Your memory lives on in every page,
And your blessings continue to enlighten my
path.**

**May Allah grant you the highest place in
Jannah.**

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Abbreviation Used

ACU	Asian Clearing Union
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BIPPA	Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement
BIS	Bureau of Indian Standards
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
DTAA	Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organisation
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GECF	Gas Exporting Countries Forum
G20	Group of Twenty
G77	Group of 77
HCSS	Hague Centre for Strategic Studies
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICCR	Indian Council for Cultural Relations
ICHHTO	Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization
IDBI Bank	Industrial Development Bank of India
IDRO	Industrial Development and Renovation Organisation.
IEF	International Energy Forum

IIT	Indian Institute of Technology
ILBSA	Iran Libya Sanctions Act
IMEEC	India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
IOCs	International Oil Companies
IOR-ARC	Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation
IPI	Iran–Pakistan-India
IPGL	India Ports Global Limited
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISA	Iran Sanctions Act
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISIRI	Institute of Standards and Industrial Research of Iran
IT	Information Technology.
ITDC	India Tourism Development Corporation
ITEC	Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation
JCM	Joint Commission Meeting
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MWL	Muslim World League
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NIOC	National Iranian Oil Company.
OBOR	One Belt, One Road
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
ONGC	Oil and Natural Gas Corporation.

OPEC	Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OVL	ONGC Videsh Limited
P5+1	China, France, Russia, UK, and USA, Plus Germany
RBI	Reserve Bank of India
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SBI	State Bank of India
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SMEs	Small and medium-sized Enterprises
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication.
TAPI	Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-India
URRS	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.
UNO	United Nations Organisation
UNSC Resolution	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UCO	Bank is United Commercial Bank
USA	United States of America
USD	United States Dollar
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
WTO	World Trade Organisation

List of Maps and Figures

Maps

Map 2.1 Geo-Strategic Location of The Islamic Republic of Iran	69
Map 3.1: India connected to Chabahar Port.	92
Map 3.2: One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.	93
Map 3.3: International North-South Transport Corridor.	95
Map:3.4: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).	97
Map 3.5: India connects to Afghanistan via Chabahar to Zaranj in Afghanistan.	99
Map 3.6: Map 3.6: IPI and TAPI Gas Pipeline Project.	102

Charts

Chart- 3.1: India-Iran Bilateral trade decreased, 2019-2023.	114
Chart- 3.2: India-Iran Bilateral trade 1991 to 2000.	119
Chart- 3.3: India-Iran Bilateral trade 2001 to 2010.	120
Chart- 3.4: India-Iran Bilateral trade 2011 to 2022.	121

Preface

The relationship between India and Iran exemplifies a distinctly modern bilateral partnership, characterised by its dynamism and complexity in the realm of contemporary international relations. The bilateral relations are shaped by a blend of historical and civilizational influences, strategic necessities, and the limitations imposed by an anarchic global system. This research examines the strategic and economic dimensions of India-Iran relations from 1991 to 2022, set against the backdrop of a shifting world economy primarily influenced by India's post-liberalisation phase, alongside the ongoing international sanctions and regional instability affecting Iran. Distinct theoretical frameworks provide insight into various perspectives of the bilateral relations between India and Iran. Neo-realism provides crucial insight into how both nations navigate issues of security and strategic independence in an increasingly adversarial international context, while becoming entangled in competitive dynamics, with Iran serving as India's gateway to Central Asia and Afghanistan amid a delicate balance of threats. Conversely, Neoliberal Institutionalism highlights how multilateral frameworks, bilateral partnerships, and economic interdependence can promote political cooperation despite existing challenges, particularly in areas such as energy collaboration and infrastructure projects like the Chabahar Port.

Constructivism expands viewpoints by illustrating how collective historical narratives, cultural ties, and civilizational links intertwine to forge identities that are mutually acknowledged, transcending immediate strategic interests. The significance of Hedging Theory lies in its effectiveness in clarifying India's measured approach towards Iran, where India engages strategically with Iran while also nurturing connections with Iran's rivals, including the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. This hedging strategy embodies India's effort to optimise advantages while mitigating risks within a dynamic geopolitical landscape. The

theory of Complex Interdependence reveals that various forms of connectivity, such as energy trade, infrastructure links, diaspora relationships, and cultural exchanges, create a network of shared vulnerabilities and opportunities that extend beyond mere security concerns. This relationship surpasses conventional state interactions and encompasses economic entities, cultural organisations, and transnational networks.

The proposed research is divided into six distinct chapters. Each chapter explores various aspects of the India-Iran bilateral relations. The proposed research demonstrates how, despite significant challenges such as American sanctions, rivalries with Saudi Arabia, and India's relations with Israel, both countries have effectively maintained their bilateral relations. Following its gradual integration into the global economy in the post-1991 period, India entered a complex context where Iran was experiencing increased isolation. Nevertheless, both nations identified strong motivations to uphold their collaboration: India's energy security requirements and aspirations for connectivity aligned with Iran's need for economic support and strategic alliances beyond its immediate vicinity. This research highlights the ability of middle powers to navigate competing geopolitical dynamics while pursuing both global and national interests, offering valuable insights into these complex interactions and their lasting effects over time.

Abstract

The proposed research examines the strategic and economic relations between India and Iran from 1991 to 2022 through the lens of various theoretical frameworks. **Neorealism** emphasises the security maximisation efforts of both nations within a multipolar context, highlighting Iran as India's western access point while India provides strategic depth for Iran to mitigate its regional isolation. **Neoliberal Institutionalism** sheds light on their collaborative efforts by referencing institutions such as the Chabahar Agreement and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which facilitate cooperation despite systemic limitations. **Constructivism** illustrates how shared civilizational ties, historical connections, and common non-Western identities foster mutual understanding with reference to cultural diplomacy and interpersonal exchanges. **Hedging Theory** accounts for India's strategy of maintaining autonomy, avoiding exclusive affiliations with any particular bloc. While engaging with Iran, it tries to cultivate relationships with the United States, Israel, and Gulf countries. **Complex Interdependence** reveals how interconnected initiatives, energy security issues, and transnational economic networks create mutual vulnerabilities and opportunities that extend beyond traditional security considerations.

Keeping in view the paradigmatic outlook as mentioned above let us contextualised the relations between India and Iran through the lens of different perspectives affecting their bilateral relations. The geostrategic importance of Iran for India's energy security and regional connectivity, infrastructure projects,

and dynamics of soft power diplomacy are evident. The geopolitical challenges posed by major powers such as the U.S., rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan would be the thrust dimensions of the proposed research. It highlights how India navigates the conflicting pressures through a pragmatic approach, engaging selectively with Iran on critical interests such as Chabahar while addressing concerns related to Western sanctions.

India-Iran Strategic and Economic Relations (1991-2022)

Introduction

Introduction

In the field of International Relations, the term "strategic and economic relations" encompasses the various ways in which nations engage with one another, taking into account both security issues and economic transactions. These two aspects are essential to understanding state behaviour within the global arena.

Strategic relations pertain to the connections established between states aimed at mutual protection. This can manifest through military alliances, defence collaborations, deterrence tactics, or calculations related to power dynamics. Such relationships align with realist theory, emphasising the quest for security amid a chaotic international landscape. The nature of "Strategic Relations" is characterised by assessments of threats, arms races, collective security agreements, and the deployment of military force or coercion as instruments of diplomacy. To uphold their sovereignty, safeguard crucial interests, and enhance their relative power against possible threats, states engage in strategic actions.

Economic Relations encompass trade, investments, financial exchanges, and the economic interdependence among nations. The liberal institutionalist perspective emphasises that economic collaboration fosters peace through mutual advantages and interconnected interests. Aspects such as trade agreements, monetary coordination, development assistance, and economic sanctions are categorised under these economic relationships. Nations utilise economic strategies to enhance prosperity, secure resource access, and exert influence without resorting to military means. The relationship between these various dimensions is a subject of theoretical debate. Classical realists view economics primarily in relation to security concerns, whereas liberals argue that economic interdependence can reduce competitive tensions. Constructivists analyse how common norms influence both economic and security cooperation. Contemporary geopolitical

economics further elaborates on how states strategically employ economic tools to achieve specific aims, thereby merging conventional distinctions. Recent research increasingly recognises the interconnectedness of these relations. For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) highlights the significance of strategic positioning in economic infrastructure endeavours. Similarly, financial sanctions imposed on Russia demonstrate how economic measures can be weaponised to support security agendas. To fully grasp today's international relations landscape, it is essential to understand the strategic motivations behind economic actions and how these connections either constrain or facilitate strategic choices, reflecting the complex interdependencies that define our modern global environment.

The **bilateral relations** between India and Iran rank among the most complex and intricate relationships in contemporary international relations. The historical backdrop of these interactions is steeped in millennia of inter-civilizational connections, from which a modern partnership has emerged, evolving through various phases of collaboration and constraint influenced by shifting geopolitical, economic, and broader global dynamics. The period from 1991 to 2022 is particularly significant; it began with India's journey towards economic liberalisation following the Cold War and extended through the tumultuous early twenty-first century, characterised by changing global power structures, regional instability, and evolving strategic alliances.

The conclusion of the Cold War in 1991, coupled with India's gradual economic reforms, fundamentally transformed the landscape of Indian foreign policy. As India embarked on a path of substantial economic liberalisation and sought to enhance its influence beyond its borders, its relationship with Iran acquired new layers of strategic significance. Despite facing international sanctions and diplomatic isolation for much of this time frame, Iran remains a crucial actor in

West Asian politics due to its considerable oil resources, strategic geographical positioning, and vital regional role.

For India, Iran transcended being merely a supplier of hydrocarbons. It represented a gateway to Central Asia and served as both a counterbalance to security challenges posed by Pakistan, particularly concerning Afghanistan, and as a collaborative partner. However, the India-Iran relationship was continuously affected by external pressures, most prominently from the United States, whose sanctions against Iran posed significant challenges for Indian policymakers to navigate energy security needs while maintaining autonomy in relations with Western nations. This intricate dynamic renders the India-Iran bilateral relationship an exemplary case for examining how middle powers manoeuvre amidst conflicting interests within an increasingly multipolar global system.

Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding the relationship between India and Iran necessitates a nuanced analytical framework that incorporates various theoretical viewpoints from the field of international relations. This research utilises five interrelated theoretical models, Neorealism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, Constructivism, Hedging Theory, and Complex Interdependence, to offer a thorough insight into the factors influencing this bilateral relationship.

Neorealism: Neorealist theory, rooted in Kenneth Waltz's framework, the actions of states are primarily influenced by the configuration of the international system and their capacity to conform to a recognised order. In an anarchic international context, where a higher authority cannot ensure security, states are often unreliable guardians. The neorealist perspective emphasises the interaction of structural elements that have both facilitated cooperation and imposed limitations on India-Iran relations.

From a neorealist viewpoint, the years following 1991 represent a shift from bipolarity to unipolarity, marked by the emergence of the United States as the singular superpower. This significant structural transformation has profoundly altered the strategic landscape for both India and Iran. Factors such as power distribution, security integration, geopolitical realignments, and resource access contributed to a fractured global order. For Iran, the dissolution of the Soviet Union eliminated a potential counterbalance to American dominance but also made it more susceptible to intensified U.S. pressure concerning its nuclear program and regional initiatives.

The U.S.'s "dual containment" strategy in the 1990s aimed to restrain both Iran and Iraq, limiting Tehran's capacity to normalise relations with Western nations. Adhering to neorealist principles, Iran sought to counterbalance American hegemony through asymmetric methods, developing its military capabilities, establishing non-state proxies, and diversifying its international alliances, including ties with India.

During this period, India's strategic decisions were influenced by neorealist thought. After gaining independence, India aspired to break free from its non-aligned status and assert itself as a major power. The nuclear tests conducted in 1998 underscored its resolve for autonomy amid various geopolitical challenges, notably considering China and Pakistan's nuclear capabilities. India's quest for energy security, access to Central Asian markets, and influence over Afghanistan led it to engage with Iran strategically.

The development of Chabahar port exemplified not just trade facilitation but also provided an alternative route bypassing Pakistan for accessing Central Asia, enhancing India's competitive position in South Asia. Nonetheless, neorealism reveals limitations in India-Iran collaboration. India formed a closer alignment with the United States in the early years of the twenty-first century, culminating

in the nuclear agreement of 2008, it faced increasing pressure to distance itself from Tehran.

Within a neorealist context, India's decisions to vote against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2005 and 2009 reflect a pragmatic evaluation; aligning with the U.S. was deemed more beneficial than maintaining relations with Iran. The extensive sanctions imposed by both Washington and the UN Security Council created structural constraints that diminished economic interactions between India and Iran.

The post-2010 period witnessed a shift towards a new multipolar order within Asia due to China's rise, altering regional dynamics. This structural change introduced new complexities into India-Iran relations. China's substantial investments in Iran, particularly following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and their escalation after America's withdrawal, presented both opportunities and concerns for India. While Chinese involvement could potentially enhance projects like Chabahar port initiated by India, it simultaneously posed strategic risks through possible Chinese control over vital energy supplies and maritime routes essential for Indian interests.

This situation underscores neorealism's emphasis on relative gains. India's engagement with Iran should be viewed through this lens rather than absolute considerations independent of China's growing influence. Moreover, this framework can elucidate why India-Iran relations persist despite U.S.-imposed pressures. Tehran views its relationship with New Delhi as crucial for avoiding total isolation, demonstrating that U.S. sanctions cannot entirely sever Iran's connections to the global economy.

For India, maintaining ties with Iran offers strategic advantages concerning Afghanistan while ensuring energy supply access from Central Asia without excessive dependence on Gulf Arab states allied with Pakistan. Both nations have

exhibited what neorealists term "strategic hedging", cultivating diverse partnerships to mitigate vulnerabilities associated with reliance on any single power.

Neoliberal Institutionalism: Neoliberal Institutionalism acknowledges the anarchic nature of the international system but differentiates itself from neorealism by emphasising potential avenues for cooperation through various institutions, regimes, and interdependence. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have posited that international institutions facilitate cooperation by providing essential information to lower transaction costs, fostering reciprocity principles, and establishing mechanisms for dispute resolution. The theoretical foundations of this analysis offer insights into how India and Iran have navigated structural challenges to maintain their cooperative relationship. Despite periods of tension between the two nations, multilateral institutions have played a key role in sustaining their engagement.

Both countries are members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which advocates for sovereignty, non-intervention, and resistance to unilateral coercive measures. India's participation in NAM has provided it with a basis for defending Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy, even as New Delhi voted against Tehran at the IAEA. This institutional connection has allowed both nations to express support for shared principles while mediating specific conflicts. Further, as members of the United Nations and its specialised agencies, India and Iran have often aligned their positions on issues such as Palestinian rights, countering Western interventionism, and reforming international financial institutions.

Regional institutions hold particular significance in their relationship. Both India and Iran are founding members. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a multi-modal transportation pathway that connects India, Iran, Central Asia, and Russia. Established an inter-governmental agreement in 2000, this corridor creates an institutional framework aimed at minimising access

costs and enhancing connectivity. While implementation challenges persist, the INSTC has served as a foundation for ongoing technical discussions and incremental progress in infrastructure development. The establishment of formal agreements, working groups, and regular ministerial meetings exemplifies how neoliberal institutional principles operate, promoting optimistic expectations from higher authorities while fostering broad-based cooperation rather than merely managing tensions reactively.

The development of Chabahar port illustrates how mutually beneficial institutions can foster collaboration. The trilateral agreement signed in 2016 concerning Chabahar between India, Iran, and Afghanistan established a framework with clear commitments, timelines, and coordination mechanisms. Initiatives like India's Ports Global Limited investment in Chabahar reflect structural arrangements designed to institutionalise cooperation while ensuring stakeholders have vested interests in its success. When U.S. sanctions threatened these efforts, India negotiated a waiver by framing Chabahar as crucial for humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, an argument that resonated because it aligned with genuine developmental objectives rather than solely economic interests.

Economic interdependence is a pivotal aspect of neoliberal institutionalism that has simultaneously driven and hindered India-Iran relations. In the 2000s, trade significantly increased between the two countries. India became one of Iran's largest oil purchasers. This interdependence created mutual vulnerabilities. Iran depended on Indian markets for hard currency while India relied on Iranian energy supplies. Neoliberal institutionalism suggests that such interdependence makes conflict costly while promoting cooperation. However, during periods of sanctions, this theory revealed limitations regarding asymmetrical vulnerabilities; India could diversify its oil imports more easily than Iran could find alternative markets.

Despite sanctions restricting certain trades, ongoing transactions involving permitted goods, along with alternative payment methods like rupee-rial exchanges, showcased how established economic ties motivate continued engagement even amidst crises. Financial institutions played crucial roles in sustaining these economic connections despite sanction pressures; UCO Bank and IDBI Bank facilitated rupee payments for Iranian oil while exploring barter arrangements, exemplifying innovative responses to circumvent sanctions.

Although these methods did not fully normalise economic relations between the two countries, they demonstrated both parties' commitment to maintaining ties through innovative institutional frameworks. The concept of "institutional resilience," inherent in neoliberal institutionalism, underscores that increased levels of institutionalised cooperation can endure political setbacks.

Cultural exchange initiatives further enrich this aspect of neoliberal institutionalist collaboration. Initiatives such as the Indian Cultural Centre in Tehran, along with student exchanges, create extensive transnational connections that foster vested interests on both sides, aiming to preserve reciprocal relationships amidst governmental tensions.

However, neoliberal institutionalism also reveals limitations within India-Iran ties; insufficient foreign direct investment, combined with weak defence cooperation structures, highlights external constraints stemming from mutual apprehensions coupled with foreign influences. In contrast to India's relationships with Southeast Asian nations, with Japan, which feature comprehensive security-related frameworks, India-Iran relations lack robust formal institutions capable of reinforcing stability within their interactions.

This absence increases vulnerability to disruptions within their relationship, limiting potential benefits derived from stronger "lock-in" effects typically afforded by well-established institutions. Challenges related to implementing

large-scale connectivity projects beyond Chabahar illustrate how deficiencies in complementary structures (such as dispute resolution mechanisms and effective legal protections) impede deeper cooperation efforts.

Constructivism: Constructivism in International Relations posits that the interests and identities of states emerge from interactions, dialogues, shared norms, and historical narratives rather than being determined by material resources. Scholars such as Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore, and Kathryn Sikkink demonstrate how ideas, culture, and identity impact international relations. Examining the constructivist approach within the context of India-Iran relations reveals aspects of their bilateral ties that may be overlooked when focusing solely on material connections or institutional frameworks. This is particularly significant given the historical and civilizational narratives linking Iran and India.

Both nations possess ancient civilisations that have interacted with one another for millennia through trade, cultural exchanges, and intellectual influences. The Persian language has notable Indian languages like Urdu. Mughal architecture shares a heritage with Persian aesthetics, and both countries celebrate a common appreciation for Sufi poetry, fostering a deep cultural connection. Political leaders in both Iran and India have frequently referenced this shared history to underscore the profundity and authenticity of their bilateral relationship. When Iranian officials refer to India as a "civilizational neighbour" or when Indian representatives talk about a "time-tested" friendship, they are participating in the creation of identity. This language signifies that their relationship goes beyond simple exchanges, reflecting deeper aspirations linked to their respective national identities.

These strong relations are enhanced by their shared post-colonial identities. Both nations resisted Western imperial domination, India under British colonial rule, and Iran amidst Anglo-Russian interference and Anglo-American interventions. Their mutual struggle against Western hegemony fosters aligned views on

sovereignty, non-interference, internationalisation needs, and calls for reform within global institutions. Iran's Islamic Revolution explicitly positioned itself as an anti-imperialist movement, rejecting both American capitalism and Soviet communism. India's role in the Non-Aligned Movement served as a protective stance against Cold War dominance. Despite differing circumstances, both countries cultivated identities as advocates for the Global South opposed to Western governance models.

A second dimension influencing bilateral relations is religious and cultural pluralism. India's significant Muslim minority, coupled with its tradition of religious tolerance, has enabled it to maintain cordial ties with Iran despite the latter's Islamic Revolution. For Iran, strong relations with India signify its potential to engage constructively with non-Muslim-majority nations embracing diversity in faiths. Conversely, for India, its partnership with Iran reinforces its commitment to Muslim populations domestically while also signalling solidarity to the broader Islamic world.

Prime Minister Modi's visits to Iran and meetings with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and his emphasis on historical cultural connections, serve domestic political agendas by showcasing inclusive foreign policies responsive to public sentiment. Nevertheless, religious identity introduces complexities into these dynamics. Iran's Shia identity alongside sectarian rivalry with Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia complicates India's diplomatic balancing act between these two nations. Given that India's vast Muslim population predominantly identifies as Sunni, New Delhi must navigate these relationships carefully.

The constructivist viewpoint highlights the necessity for an India that embodies characteristics of a secular democracy, inclusive of its substantial Muslim community, while simultaneously positioning itself as a civilizational ally of Persia, a valuable partner in the West amid diverse identity claims.

Sovereignty and non-intervention represent foundational norms guiding India-Iran relations; both countries have persistently opposed Western military incursions into regions like the Middle East and South Asia. Iran opposes U.S.-led invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan, similarly to India's rejection of unilateral actions undermining state sovereignty. Neither nation has acquiesced to external pressures demanding modifications in its governmental structures. Iran, regarding its political regime and human rights practices, and India, concerning Kashmir and religious freedoms. This mutual dedication to principles rooted in Westphalian sovereignty engenders normative solidarity despite occasional divergences.

The nuclear non-proliferation framework illustrates how differing normative views can be resolved through constructivist dialogue strategies and persuasive methods. India has refrained from signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), perceiving it as biased. However, it has called on Iran to fulfil its safeguards obligations. This seemingly contradictory stance is reconciled through a discourse that distinguishes between "responsible" nuclear-armed states, an identity India claims for itself, and those pursuing nuclear weapons in violation of treaty obligations, which Iran rejects. The constructivist focus on persuasion and dialogue rather than coercion clarifies why India's criticism of Iran's nuclear program did not lead to a breakdown in relations. It was articulated as counsel from a concerned ally regarding sanctions, rather than as a moral rebuke.

Furthermore, shared resistance against terrorism forms another key normative link between these nations, both of which have suffered from terrorist violence and view it as an existential threat deserving concerted action against it. Concerns over terrorist activities linked back to Pakistan resonate strongly within Iranian contexts, where groups funded by regional adversaries pose similar threats. Framing counter-terrorism efforts within genuine state interests, overriding other

areas of disagreement, has facilitated cooperation even during tense periods marked by strain.

“Strategic autonomy” represents an essential norm reflected in the foreign policy initiatives of both countries. For India, it signifies independence from major power blocs while making decisions based on national interests. For Iran, as articulated since its Islamic Revolution, it embodies a vehement opposition to external interference, ensuring complete autonomy over decision-making processes.

Mutual commitments towards independence cultivate understandings leading each side towards choices potentially diverging from preferences expressed by counterpart nations; India's nuclear agreement with America juxtaposed against Iran's pursuit of uranium enrichment capabilities illustrates this assertion regarding strategic freedom, a phenomenon constructivism might elucidate concerning why concessions were made following initial tensions.

The evolving landscape surrounding international norms related to democratic governance presents forthcoming challenges for relations between India and Iran. India's increasing alignment with democratic frameworks, espousing values widely criticised for human rights violations observed within Iranian governance structures, necessitates careful navigation between longstanding principles advocating non-interference and growing expectations voiced by Western partners urging accountability on governance matters.

Ultimately, how both parties manage these shifting norms while preserving diplomatic ties will critically shape future interactions between them.

Hedging Theory: We gain a deeper understanding of how states address uncertainty and manage risks by avoiding exclusive commitments to a single partner while benefitting from various strategic options. Hedging moves away from the traditional notion that states either balance against or bandwagon with dominant

powers, acknowledging that in practice, states often maintain multiple competing yet cooperative partnerships and frequently adopt mixed strategies. This theoretical framework proves particularly useful in elucidating the relationships between India and Iran, both of which have historically avoided exclusive alliances and embraced diversified partnerships. Consequently, India's connection with Iran forms part of a broader hedging approach relevant to its engagement in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Rather than choosing sides between conflicting regional factions, such as Iran versus Gulf nations or competing great powers, India's diplomatic relations exemplify what scholars term "Non-Alignment," where it engages extensively across various countries. India has established robust strategic ties in collaboration with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Israel, while maintaining longstanding connections with Iran. The objectives of this hedging strategy are multifaceted: securing access to diverse energy sources, preventing any isolated entity from gaining leverage over Indian interests, allowing flexibility to adapt policies in response to changing regional dynamics, and signalling India's status as an independent actor rather than one bound within a bloc.

The concept of Hedging clarifies the seemingly contradictory aspects of India's foreign policy, which might be overlooked if one strictly applies neorealist and institutionalist perspectives. India's concurrent collaboration with Israel in defence and intelligence, coupled with its ongoing relations with Iran, its alliance with Saudi Arabia despite its connections to Pakistan, while also engaging with Iran, and its strategic ties with the United States amidst sanctions against Iran, these instances are not signs of contradiction or confusion but rather exemplify a deliberate strategy of hedging. By not becoming overly reliant on any single partner, India ensures that each relationship addresses different facets of its

national interests, thus avoiding vulnerabilities associated with coercion or abandonment.

Similarly, Iran participates in hedging but does so under considerably tighter constraints due to intense pressure from the United States and regional allies. To avoid isolation on the global stage, Iran has cultivated diverse partnerships. Its relationship with India acts as a buffer against over-dependence on China and Russia, its primary external supporters whose interests do not always align perfectly with those of Tehran. Through this partnership, India offers market access and connectivity via Chabahar port, reducing dependence on Pakistani routes while providing a regional ally not aligned against Iran.

Iran's ongoing engagement with India signifies its intention not to become subservient to China and Russia but instead maintains some degree of agency in managing international relations. Hedging theory distinguishes among various strategies: economic hedging through diversified trade relations, security hedging via varied defence collaborations, and political hedging through participation in multiple institutional frameworks. India's strategy regarding Iran encompasses all three aspects. Economic diversification is evident in its energy imports from both Iranian sources and Gulf states, and security cooperation is illustrated through developing Chabahar alongside strengthening ties with sceptical Arab nations. Political hedging is reflected by India's involvement in Western-oriented groups like the Quad as well as institutions involving Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation).

The intensity of these hedges correlates directly with perceptions of risk and uncertainty. Thus, India's approach towards Iran has intensified amid rising tensions between Washington and Tehran. In light of severe sanctions risks imposed by the U.S., India significantly reduced oil imports from Iran nearly to zero, a hedge against potential secondary sanctions, while simultaneously

advancing development projects like Chabahar, for which it received a sanctions waiver to mitigate total disengagement from Iranian relations.

This measured response illustrates astute hedging. India sidestepped extreme positions by neither severing all ties (which would jeopardise its international strategy) nor disregarding sanctions (which would compromise relations with the U.S.). Hedges present both advantages and challenges. They offer flexibility while lowering vulnerability, and maintaining multiple relationships provides states options without risking capture by any singular partner. However, pursuing such strategies can also incur costs; partners who desire closer alignment may perceive insufficient commitment if they sense limited investment from their allies.

The United States has frequently criticised India's stance toward Iran as lacking depth, given significant reductions in oil imports from Tehran. Conversely, there have been expressions of disappointment from Iranian officials who feel that India's prioritisation of U.S. relations undermines their long-standing friendship. These tensions highlight the inherent complexities associated with hedging to satisfy multiple partners whose conflicting interests inevitably lead to some dissatisfaction among them.

Employing concepts like insurance versus exploitation hedging refines our analysis. Insurance hedging involves maintaining relations even with potential adversaries to avert conflict while preserving options for future engagements if primary ties falter. Exploitation hedging focuses on leveraging multiple partnerships for maximising returns within those relationships. India's policy towards Iran embodies elements of both categories. It retains connections that allow flexibility should relationships deteriorate elsewhere, while simultaneously striving for benefits across all engagements based upon its strategic positioning.

The internal dynamics of Hedging within domestic politics should not be neglected. In democratic nations like India, different political groups tend to favour various alignments, and hedging strategies can assist governments in navigating these domestic influences. On one hand, pro-Western factions within the Indian strategic community advocate for a stronger relationship with the U.S. while distancing themselves from Iran. On the other hand, some emphasise the importance of strategic autonomy and long-standing alliances. By adopting a hedging approach, Indian administrations may partially satisfy both sides.

Similarly, Iran, being an authoritarian regime, faces its own domestic political pressures ranging from hardliners who oppose engagement with India due to its alignment with the U.S. to pragmatists who seek economic and strategic collaborations. This hedging strategy allows Iranian leaders to manage these conflicting internal forces effectively.

The theory of hedging suggests that India-Iran relations will continue to be marked by measured engagement rather than a full-fledged partnership or complete estrangement. Given the unpredictable strategic environment both countries face and the multitude of competing pressures they encounter simultaneously, maintaining a hedging approach remains a logical choice. However, this strategy may face challenges if external actors enforce binary options, such as if U.S. secondary sanctions become prevalent enough to threaten existing relationships with Iran or if Chinese influence in Iran grows so strong that it effectively marginalises any significant role for India.

Complex Interdependence: The theory of Complex Interdependence, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye challenge realist perspectives in international relations by illustrating how various channels of interaction among states, the lack of a hierarchical structure among various issues, along with the diminished efficacy of military power, influence the dynamics between states. Although complete complex interdependence remains uncommon, this framework offers valuable

insights into India-Iran relations that extend beyond mere security and governmental interactions.

The relationship between India and Iran encompasses multiple avenues that go beyond formal diplomatic ties. A dense network of trade links, energy agreements, shipping connections, diaspora communities, cultural institutions, as well as exchanges in literature and media illustrates their interdependencies. Indian enterprises are active in Iran's pharmaceutical and agricultural sectors; Iranian crude oil has been pivotal to India's economic progress. Indian cinema significantly influences Iranian audiences. Furthermore, numerous Indian students are enrolled in Iranian educational institutions. These diverse connections cultivate mutual interests for both nations that prioritise maintaining their ties despite periods of strained relations.

One notable channel is the Indian diaspora residing in Iran alongside a smaller Iranian community in India. While not as extensive as Indian populations found in Gulf states, Indians working across various sectors, such as medicine, engineering, or technology, forge interpersonal connections and contribute remittances. Additionally, Iranian students pursuing education at Indian universities form lasting bonds and foster mutual understanding. These diasporic relationships operate independently from formal governmental policies and thus provide support for both nations.

Culturally speaking, this aspect may be the most significant facet connecting India and Iran. Despite their political differences and varying religious beliefs, both countries share rich artistic and literary traditions marked by mutual admiration. Persian poetry enjoys high regard in India; figures such as Hafiz, Rumi, and Saadi, among others, are widely recognised among educated Indians. Despite censorship challenges within official channels, Bollywood films have garnered an audience in Iran. Continuous translations of literary works, art

exhibitions, musical performances, and cultural festivals uphold ongoing interactions that persist even when government relations become strained.

This cultural interdependence enhances soft power assets for both countries while fostering constituencies on either side resistant to estrangement. There exists no hierarchical structure regarding issues within India-Iran relations. Although security matters, particularly concerning Afghanistan, terrorism threats, and maritime safety, are critically important, they do not dominate the entirety of their relationship. Economic challenges, including connectivity initiatives, cultural engagements during the COVID-19 pandemic response efforts, also represent significant components unaffected by overarching security concerns.

India's humanitarian assistance to Iran during the pandemic exemplified how humanitarian priorities could temporarily supersede sanctions-related complications impacting compliance with US restrictions. This situation illustrated not only a lack of malice within the issue topology but also an absence of hierarchy; when US sanctions jeopardised bilateral ties, overall economics took a back seat to political manoeuvres aimed at managing tensions.

The diminishing reliance on military force characterises critical aspects of India-Iran relations. Since both nations do not view one another as a military threat, they opt for diplomatic means to address disputes related to issues such as the development of Chabahar and payment systems, rather than resorting to coercive strategies. This complex interdependence fosters creative approaches to problem-solving and negotiation.

However, regional dynamics pose constraints, a reality where both nations remain ensnared within security frameworks necessitating military capabilities due to external pressures from rivals such as Pakistan and China for India, while Iran contends with its own regional adversaries, including the United States.

The distinction between vulnerability interdependence versus sensitivity interdependence provides analytical clarity. Sensitivity interdependence describes how quickly changes within one nation can impose costly implications on another. For instance, India's economy is sensitive to fluctuations in Iranian oil prices, while Iran's economy reacts similarly to shifts in Indian purchasing behaviour.

Instances of vulnerability interdependence, where adjusting becomes prohibitively expensive, exiting relationships harmful, are infrequent. When sanctions required India to reduce its reliance on Iranian oil, it demonstrated adaptability despite associated pains. Notably, Iran successfully sought alternative markets, particularly with China, confirming that trade with India was beneficial yet not irreplaceable.

Infrastructure interdependence is expected to grow as connectivity initiatives progress. Projects such as the Chabahar port and the International North-South Transport Corridor, and potential railway connections, suggest a scenario of significant infrastructure reliance, where each nation's access to third-party markets hinges on facilities in its partner nation. If Indian shipments transit through Iranian land to reach Central Asia and Russia, while Afghan trade utilises Chabahar, there would be strong motivations for both countries to maintain stable relations due to this infrastructure interdependence. However, this potential has not yet been fully realised, partly due to the constraints imposed by sanctions and the challenges associated with implementation.

The energy sector represents a crucial area of complex interdependence that has faced disruption. For over ten years, India depended heavily on Iranian oil for a significant share of its energy requirements, while Iran relied on Indian markets and financial transactions. This situation raises considerable economic concerns regarding the preservation of their relationship. Indian refineries were specifically designed to process Iranian crude oil. Similarly, the Iranian budget had

anticipated payments from India. The severing of this energy connection due to sanctions highlighted both the depth of their mutual dependence and its vulnerabilities under extreme external pressures (both nations eventually adapted to these changes, albeit at great cost).

Information and technology exchanges represent an often-overlooked aspect of interdependence. Knowledge collaboration via academic partnerships, scientific exchanges, and technology transfers in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and civil engineering reflects another layer of potential cooperation. India's proficiency in information technology, combined with Iran's strengths in specific scientific domains, could foster deeper collaboration over time. Nonetheless, limitations on technological transfers to Iran, concerns regarding dual-use technologies, and institutional inertia in scientific collaboration have restricted the development of this dimension.

Significance of the Research

The India-Iran relationship extends beyond mere bilateral relations and holds considerable importance. For India, its partnership with Iran remains crucial for ensuring energy security, enhancing regional connectivity, gaining access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and preserving strategic autonomy in its foreign policy. Conversely, Iran views India as a vital market, an avenue for investment and technology transfer, and a diplomatic partner that would assist in alleviating its international isolation. Both nations share an interest in fostering regional stability, combating terrorism, and resisting external dominance.

This relationship underscores the challenges faced by middle powers as they navigate an international landscape characterised by great power rivalries, economic interdependence, and complex regional dynamics. India's strategy in handling its relationship with Iran, all the while enhancing its connections with the United States and other Western countries, illustrates various hedging

strategies that reveal potential opportunities and constraints regarding its diplomatic manoeuvres.

Despite existing challenges, the ongoing cooperation between India and Iran highlights the resilience of relationships rooted with multiple forms of mutual interdependence and shared identities. This is particularly evident when immediate policy issues arise that could otherwise create divisions. As global dynamics evolve towards greater multipolarity and deeper integration, especially with China's growing influence, Russia's resurgence, and the relative decline of U.S. power, the significance of India-Iran relations is likely to increase. Both countries advocate for a multipolar world order that allows middle powers to pursue independent foreign policies. The insights gained from their navigation through the constraints of the post-Cold War era provide valuable perspectives on how the emerging international system may function.

Review of Literature: -

There have been a huge number of published books, scripts, research papers, and articles on India-Iran relations. The available literary sources related to the mentioned area have so far mostly paid attention to the historical, political, and cultural dimensions. There have also been many analytical studies on the foreign policies of both countries in general. The emphasis on historical, cultural, and political relations between India and Iran has been studied widely in the published works by a number of eminent scholars. However, very few literatures have focused on the changing nature and dynamics of strategic and economic relations between the two countries. The proposed research has outlined some research gaps in the specific areas of study. In this proposed research, the researcher has gone through the following literary works very carefully: -

Book Review

1. Girijesh Pant, P.C Jain & A.K Pasha (Eds.) “Contemporary Iran and Emerging Indo-Iran Relations” (2019): This edited compendium by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) Gulf Studies Programme provides a full spectrum view on unfolding bilateral relations between the two countries. It explores traditional continuities and current challenges such as energy integration, regional politics and cultural cooperation. The book also examines how India is negotiating its engagement with Iran in the context of shifting global scenarios; to that end volume will serve as important reading for comprehending post-Cold War strategies of engagement.

2. Bhat Mukhtar Ahamed, "India and Iran Relations in Twentieth First Century" (2019): The book systematically covers India-Iran engagements through the examination of economic ties especially energy security. The author examines the diplomatic obstacles presented by international sanctions and US pressure, and reveals future options for collaboration. The book offers informative analysis on how these two countries draw the fine line between strategic autonomy and global constraints, and pragmatic estimations of connectivity projects like Chabahar Port.

3. Ashwarya Sujata, “India-Iran Relations: Progress, Problems and Prospects” (2017) This book is a comprehensive look at the India-Iran relationship, with voices from both sides on issues like trade, energy and strategic cooperation as well as challenges posed by sanctions and regional dynamics. The author sharply examines India’s balancing act vis-à-vis Iran and Western powers, especially with respect to the nuclear talks. The book also examines various possibilities to strengthen bilateral relations and constraints in their historically significant relationship.

4. Suja Asif, "India-Iran Relations: Under the Shadow of the Iranian Nuclear Issue" (2017):

The author analyses how Iran's independent nuclear development programme has been a source of complication for India's diplomatic overtures. The book also studies India's voting at the IAEA, energy dependence and strategic parleys in the background of Western sanctions. It offers important views of India's foreign policy predicament where the nation's interests conflict with international pressures, as well as the testing nature of navigating strategic autonomy in a multi-polar world.

5. Goud R Sidda & Mookherjee Manisha (ed.), 'India and Iran in Contemporary Relations' (2016): This edited volume examines various aspects of the relationship between India and Iran, such as trade relations, cultural ties and regional security issues. The book also explains India's realpolitik with Iran, its role as a significant priority for both regional connectivity projects, the global powers' diktat, and mutual Afghani concerns. The book successfully situates the current relations in historical and civilizational perspectives.

6. Alam Anwar (ed.), "India and Iran: Evolving Relations" (2011): A scholarly analysis of the bilateral relationship at a critical juncture. Alam examines energy cooperation, regional security calculus and India's diplomatic tightrope in the face of international sanctions. The author has provided vital insight into how India balanced its relationship with Iran while engaging the Western powers, thus reflecting Indian pragmatism in foreign policy.

7. Bari Mohammad Nazrul (ed.), "Enduring Civilizational Encounter" (2015): This book highlights the ancient civilisational links between India and Iran over a long period. The author maps out cultural, linguistic and historical ties

in order to defamiliarize contemporary political and economic relations. The book contends that ancient connections continues to be relevant for the countries engaged in this common endeavour of peace and prosperity, by providing novel insight into how civilizational affinity shapes contemporary diplomacy and strategic alliances amidst changing geopolitical landscapes.

8. H.A Nazmi (ed.), 'Contemporary West Asia and North Africa: Defining India's Role' (2019): In this volume, Indo-Iranian relations are described in the context of West Asian dynamics. The author also deals with India's changing strategic trajectory in the region, covering energy security, connectivity initiatives and maritime engagement. The book places bilateral relations in the context of India's strategy of overall regional engagement, suggesting how Iran constitutes a part of its extended neighborhood and Act East policy.

9. Kumaraswamy P.R. & Roy Meena Singh, "Persian Gulf 2016-17: India's Relations with the Region", 2018 This IDSA publication is an annual appraisal of India's relations with Iran. It assesses economic interaction, sharing of defense technology, and diaspora concerns to understand how regional tensions have affected Indian interests. The book provides worthwhile insights into India's elusive balancing of Iran and Arab gulf states, and the difficulties of treating both sides equally across the Persian Gulf.

10. Mahmood Fazal & Azmi Rafiullah (ed.), "Foreign Policy of India and West Asia" (2014): An edited book that studies the new trends as well as continuities in the foreign policy of India toward the region in post-liberalisation. The book explains Iran as part of India's expansive regional strategy featuring energy diplomacy, strategic partnerships, Arab Spring responses, and the creation of new multilateral institutions. The book convincingly shows how India was able

to reconcile its traditional non-alignment policy with the power dynamics of today, without abandoning its foreign policy.

11. Prof. A.K. Pasha (ed.), "India's Political and Foreign Relations with the Gulf Region" (2014): The author considers India's holistic Gulf engagement, placing ties with Iran side by side those with Arab states. It's a study of historical evolution, economic interdependence and strategic architecture. It goes some way to explain how India juggles conflicting interests and keeps ears and doors open at both ends of the ideological and political spectrum in the strategically significant Gulf.

12. Prof. A.K Pasha (ed.), "India and the GCC States" (2014): This is a companion volume that deals specifically with India-GCC relations but offers important background on India's policy toward Iran. The author examines how India manages relations between Iran and the Arab Gulf states including economic links, defense collaboration, and energy security. The book focuses on the diplomatic challenges in sustaining balanced relations in regional disputes and sectarian frictions.

13. Alam Anwar (ed.), "India, Global Power and West Asia" (2011) This book analyse the global rise of India, and its impact on engagement in West Asia. The author examines the ramifications of India s rising economic and strategic capacities on its relations with Iran and regional policies. The book situates India–Iran relations amidst India's desire for increased power status in world politics and the opportunities and challenges of seeking regional power status.

14. Alam Anwar (ed.), "India and West Asia in the era of Globalisation" (2008): This book examines how globalization influenced India's relationship with West Asia, more specifically Iran. The author analyse the effects of

liberalization on trade flows, energy collaboration and diplomatic postures. The book offers unique perspectives on how economic reforms and globalisation influenced India's policy towards Iran, balancing commercial interests with its concern for strategic autonomy.

15. Anwar (ed.), “Iran and Post-9/11 World Order” (2009): This book is a study of Iran’s nuclear program and what it has meant for the world. Though not specifically on the India-Iran relationship, it will enable the reader to understand the challenges that India had encountered in sustaining relationship with Iran under international sanctions and Western pressures. The book examines diplomacy, regional security issues and non-proliferation discussions and the impact of these on bilateral engagement.

16. Dr. A.K. Pasha, “India, Iran and the GCC States” (2000): This book looks at trilateral dynamics as of the year 2000. The author analyses India’s attempts to manage its relationships with both Iran and the Arab Gulf countries amidst ongoing regional conflicts. Penned before significant post-9/11 changes, it offers useful base knowledge of bilateral ties and regional intricacies that would go on to influence the course of India’s Gulf diplomacy.

17. G.A. Qamar, "The Early Cultural Relations of India and Iran" (2011): The author studies ancient inter-civilisational links through cultural contact, commercial avenues and intellectual ties. Although rooted in history, the book offers important history for those interested in modern cultural developments. It shows how history informs contemporary diplomacy and people-to-people relations between the two civilizations.

18. A.K.Pasha (ed.), “Perspectives On Indian and the Gulf Countries” (1999) This edited volume reflects on India’s Gulf relations at a transformative moment.

The author examines the effects of economic liberalization on bilateral relations, early in terms of its relationship with Iran. The book offers crucial historical insights in to how the reforms of the 1990s triggered momentous changes in India's West Asian engagement thereby consolidating the base for extended cooperation.

19. A.K. Pasha, "India and West Asia: Continuity and Change" (1999) In his book, the author examines emerging trends in India's policy toward West Asia in the 1990s. This examine the impact that economic liberalization, post-Cold War reordering and domestic political transformation had on bilateral relations with Iran. Theis book is important because it offers critical perspective on the adaptation of policies around traditions of friendship, and spans Cold War and post-Cold War eras.

20. Ahmad Talmiz, The Islamist Challenge in West Asia (2013): In the book author discusses the Arab Spring's effect on regional power politics and its relevance for India. Although not primarily focused on Iran, the author explores how the regional turmoil impacted India's strategic thinking and its bilateral ties. The book gives crucial background to the way in which regional instability shaped India-Iran cooperation on Afghanistan and other common worries.

21. Alam Anwar, "Contemporary West Asia - Politics and Development" (2010): This book examine the regional political economy and developmental concerns. The author situates India-Iran relationship in the wider context of change in West Asia It is a scholarly effort that looks at the interplay between regional interaction and bilateral cooperation. The book offers valuable insights into the role of Iran in the region and how India deals with complex politics to pursue strategic as well as economic interests.

22. Khan Javed Ahmad, "India and West Asia: Emerging Markets in the Liberalisation Era" (1999): The author examines liberal economic policy impact on relations with the region during its early stages, especially trade and investment. The book analyse the ways in which market-oriented reforms presented themselves as opening up mutually beneficial possibilities for bilateral economic cooperation with Iran and other regional states, thus shifting away from previous state-centric approaches towards more commercially driven relations.

Article Review

1. Soltaninejad, M. (2017). Iran-India Relations: The elusive strategic partnership. *India Quarterly: Journal of International Affairs*, 73(1), 21-35.

This article examines the factors that have prevented India and Iran from establishing a strategic partnership, despite significant potential for collaboration. The primary reason lies in their conflicting foreign policy goals, while Iran aims to maintain a balance with the United States, India seeks to engage with both Iran and the US, which has hindered deeper relations between them. Utilising soft balancing theory, the article reveals how US influence has consistently obstructed cooperative diplomatic initiatives between the two nations, even when there is a shared interest in regional stability, economic development, and geographical closeness. The author concludes that these differing strategic priorities have limited their relationship to one characterised as 'cordial' and 'friendly', rather than genuinely strategic.

2. Pant, H. V. (2011). India's ties with Iran: Much ado about nothing. *The Washington Quarterly*, 34(1), 61-74.

The author critically analyses the "strategic partnership" between India and Iran, asserting that it lacks substantial strategic depth. He examines how India's policy

in the Middle East is interpreted through an Iranian perspective, particularly concerning the nuclear debate related to Iran. This article illustrates India's nuanced role in balancing its ties with Iran while fostering a growing strategic alliance with the United States. The author contends that Western emphasis on specific aspects of India-Iran relations has obscured the reality that India is increasingly engaged with Arab Gulf nations and Israel, noting that there is very little within the relationship itself that can be considered genuinely "strategic."

3. Pant, H. V. (2004). India and Iran: An 'axis'? *Asian Survey*, 44(3), 369-383.

This article explores the connections between India and Iran during a pivotal time when both nations announced a strategic partnership. Pant investigates the strategic rationale behind Indo-Iranian collaboration, highlighting significant constraints that prevent their partnership from achieving its maximum potential. These challenges include pressure from the United States, regional dynamics, and India's conflicts with Israel and Saudi Arabia. The article also illuminates areas of cooperation in energy, regional security issues, and the interplay between domestic and international politics that shaped bilateral relations in the early 2000s.

4. Pant, H. V. (2007). A delicate balance: India walks a tightrope between Iran and the United States. *Orbis*, 51(3), 495-509.

This article illustrates India's precarious balancing act between its energy obligations to Iran and its strategic partnerships with the United States. The author analyses how India has navigated external influences on its foreign policy regarding Iran's nuclear program, all while protecting its energy security needs and regional interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. This article explores the conflicting demands of Indian domestic politics and strategic interests concerning

Iran, highlighting how India's aspirations on the global stage and increasing closeness to the US have intensified this contradiction.

5. Omid, A., Hafeez M. (2023). Indo-Iran Relationship: Role of Third-Party Interference. South Asian Survey, India Quarterly.

This article explores the evolution of India's foreign policy, shifting from Nehruism to Pragmatism, and its repercussions for India-Iran relations. The authors argue that despite the long-standing historical, cultural, and economic ties between India and Iran, particularly in terms of energy supply over several decades, India has increasingly turned to Saudi Arabia and Iraq to support its contemporary megaprojects. This article highlights a new strategic alignment between India and Western nations, while also serving as a crucial reminder of how external influences, particularly from the United States and Israel, have affected bilateral relationships. The article examines this significant change in India's foreign policy and its implications for regional coalitional dynamics.

6. Omid, A., & Noolkar Oak, G. (2022). Geopolitics of Chabahar port for Iran, India and Afghanistan. Geopolitics Quarterly, 17.

This article evaluates the trilateral economic agreement established in January 2016 regarding Chabahar Port, located in southeastern Iran. The authors investigate the strategic, economic, and trade importance of Chabahar for both Iran and India. The authors characterise the trade partnership between Iran and India as a strategic countermeasure to China's Belt and Road Initiative and Pakistan's Gwadar port. This article explores how the initiative aligns with the objectives of both nations, enhancing regional connectivity and facilitating access to Central Asian markets via the Indian coastline while also countering Chinese dominance in the Indian Ocean region and South Asia.

7. Singh, S., and Singh, B. (2019). Ports geopolitics: Iran in India's balance of power maritime strategy against 'Sino-Pak' axis. *Geopolitics Quarterly*.

This article explores the importance of Iran from India's perspective, particularly in relation to the China-Pakistan axis. The author analyses how the post-Cold War period is introducing a new facet to the relationship between India and Iran. They argue that Chabahar Port serves as a crucial element in India's strategy to counterbalance the Sino-Pak strategic alliance. Furthermore, this article addresses a significant gap in existing literature by examining Indian regional security frameworks and Iran's role within India's overall strategic considerations concerning China and Pakistan.

8. Haji Yousefi, A., & Narouei, H. (2021). Geopolitics, geo-economics and possibility of Iran-India partnership in Chabahar. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 17(63).

This article explores the geopolitical and geo-economic dimensions of the Iran-India partnership through the development of Chabahar port. The authors analyse how this collaboration aligns with their strategic goals of accessing Central Asian markets and countering rival influences. They assess both the opportunities and challenges for bilateral cooperation within the context of regional politics, including longstanding US sanctions and emerging Chinese assertiveness. The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the implications of the Chabahar project for each country's foreign policy objectives.

9. Fair, C. C. (2007). India and Iran: New Delhi's tightrope walk. *The Washington Quarterly*, 30(3), 145-159.

The author examines the elements that captivate India in allying with Iran, ultimately concluding that, despite apprehensions from the United States, such a collaboration is plausible. She delves into India's energy requirements, regional security concerns, and its perspective on Afghanistan to elucidate the reasoning behind New Delhi's interactions with Tehran. This article analyses the ramifications of this partnership for other regional players, including Pakistan, Israel, and the United States. Fair offers a perceptive analysis of India's intricate balancing act as it seeks to diminish its connections with Iran while concurrently enhancing its ties with Western countries and Israel.

10. Verma, S. K. (2007). Energy politics and the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. *Energy Policy*, 35(6).

In this article, the author analyses the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project and its geopolitical implications. The discussion includes aspects of energy security, potential for regional collaboration, and challenges such as U.S. opposition and the rivalry between India and Pakistan. The examination highlights how this significant initiative could alter the energy landscape in the region, despite facing considerable political and security hurdles. Throughout the timeline discussed, various factors ranging from technical details to geopolitical dynamics and economic considerations have hindered the realisation of this crucial project. The article underscores the intricate relationship between energy and security in South Asia.

11. Khan, M. N. (2001). India's engagement with Iran: problem and prospects. *Strategic Analysis*, XXV(6).

This article examines Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Iran in April 2001 and its effects on the relationship between the two countries. The author

investigates agreements related to oil and gas, highlighting Iran's willingness to supply energy to India via pipelines. Additionally, the article discusses how both nations sought to bridge years of tension stemming from the 1979 Iranian revolution through economic and strategic reconciliation. The author provides a historical context for India-Iran relations after the Cold War and assesses prospects for cooperation.

12. Baidya, S. (2017). India's policy on Iran: Ambiguities and complexities. International Studies (Sage Publications).

This article examines the complexities and obstacles inherent in India's policy towards Iran, positing that it is significantly influenced by India's broader ambitions and its interactions with major global powers. The author contends that India's approach to Iran is a balance between strategic policy and political considerations. She asserts that before the Iranian Nuclear Deal, U.S. pressure had constrained India's ability to independently formulate its policy regarding Iran. The article presents a crucial argument indicating that India's quest for great power status has substantially shaped its bilateral relationship with Iran.

13. Khan, K. H., and Ekstrom, M. (2024). The INSTC and Chabahar port: A review. Journal of the Indian Ocean Region.

The authors conducted a thorough literature review and bibliometric analysis encompassing various scholarly articles related to the INSTC and Chabahar port. The study identifies four distinct phases in the academic progression of research on this subject, along with the impact of these articles on economic corridors and transnational governance. It emphasises the significant role of Sino-Indian rivalry and Indo-Iranian collaboration in driving development, while also noting Russia's increased interest following the Ukraine conflict in 2022. This comprehensive

assessment provides a valuable synthesis of existing literature and outlines directions for future research.

15. Alam, A. (2011). Iran-India: Analysis of the present relations. Digest of Middle East Studies, 22(1), 140–142.

This article analyses the evolution of Iran's modern relationship with India, particularly during a period characterised by international sanctions and shifting regional dynamics. It examines the two nations' collaboration in areas such as energy, trade, and regional security, offering insights into how they navigated their partnership amid external pressures and competing strategic interests from other regional and global powers. Despite its brevity, this article effectively summarises key elements of intergovernmental relations during that era.

16. Scott, D. (2009). India's extended neighbourhood: power projection for a rising power. India Review, 8(2), 107-143.

The extended neighbourhood of India as a frame of power projection is the subject of this article. The author examines the way in which India perceives its strategic environment, a region that is no longer confined to South Asia but encompasses the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. It discusses how Iran is part of this enlarged strategic vision, and New Delhi was trying to build bridges across the extended neighbourhood, largely using diplomatic and economic initiatives. The author's analysis gives us a lot of context about how India thinks strategically, about its engagement not just in the region but also across trans-regional spaces.

17. Hathaway, R. M. (2004). India's 'strategic partnership' with Iran. Asia Program Special Report, No. 120. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Centre for International Scholars.

This article examines fresh warmth in New Delhi and Tehran's relations post-2003 announcement of their "strategic partnership." Hathaway considers how this particular collaboration may affect the interests of other regional stakeholders. It also includes several pieces of analysis which examine the calculations that render Iran an attractive partner to India, Iranian views on the relationship, Pakistan's apprehensions about it and its impact on India's relations with Israel. The article includes an in-depth, multi-faceted review of the announcement of the strategic partnership and its regional impact.

18. Pethiyagoda, K. (2018). India's quest for strategic and economic goals in Iran. Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper No.23

This article examines India's intricate balancing act as it navigates its strategic interests with Iran while maintaining its relationships with the United States and Israel. Pethiyagoda looks at India's need for energy security, the strategic significance of the Chabahar port and what global sanctions have done to bilateral trade. This article examines India's pragmatic engagement with Iran despite external challenges with economic and geopolitical calculations in Indian policy-making. The study offers a subtle understanding of India's Iran policy in an overall strategic perspective.

19. Wani, S. H., Mir, M. A., & Shah, I. A. (2019). India–Iran trade in the face of USA Sanctions. Foreign Trade Review, 54(3), 199-216.

India-Iran trade ties in the face of US sanctions are analysed through this article. The authors examine the impact of sanctions on bilateral trade flows, including oil imports and other industries. They consider India's efforts to continue on an economic path with Iran despite international and financial limitations. The article provides a practical analysis of trade data and its repercussions for the economic interests of both nations. Additionally, the authors explore how India has balanced international sanctions with its strategic priorities.

20. Pant, H. V. (2013). India in Afghanistan: A test case for emerging power. *Journalism of International Relations*, 17(1), 1—24.

The article examines India's involvement in Afghanistan and how it plays within the context of India-Iran relations. The author explores how India's role in Afghan reconstruction and development relies greatly on Iranian cooperation, especially at Chabahar port. The article further considers how, for India, an Afghanistan policy involves juggling Pakistan and the US with great delicacy yet again. Afghanistan, Pant contends, is the testing ground where India's growing power aspirations will be measured along with its ability to manage tricky regional geopolitics.

21. Kaura, V., et al. (2024). Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as a catalyst for India-Iran cooperation. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 9(1), pp.57-72.

This article examines how the Taliban's control of Afghanistan serves as a new impetus for India to re-engage with Iran. The authors examine trust-building prospects for India with Iran in conceptualising long-term stakes in Afghanistan. They point out that India and Iran have common concerns, particularly in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and cooperation over Afghanistan could open up new

pathways for India's strategic depth and assuage its national security worries. This article offers current perspectives on regional security and the reconfiguration of India-Iran relations.

22. Ganie, R. A., 2: For entry in: Ganie, M. A. (2022). India's Afghanistan Policy Post US Pullout. Humanities and Social Science Communications, 9:462.

This article looks at India's interests and options in Afghanistan after US pullout and the Taliban comeback. The authors analyse how the US removal of the Taliban in 2001 opened political space for India to re-enter Afghanistan. They explore India's soft power strategy and the implications of its developmental initiatives, faced with challenges from the resurgence of the Taliban, supported by Pakistan. This article states how these developments are affecting India's necessity of holding a close relationship with Iran to get access to Afghanistan, which seriously contradicts its regional security stances.

23. Abbassian, P. (2022). Iran's calculus in the face of the Taliban resurgence: "enemy of my enemy" dynamics. Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs, 9(3).

The author uses the "My Enemy's Enemy" model to analyse Iran's policy towards the resurgence of the Taliban. In a nuanced account, Abbassian examines Iran's management of intricate security dilemmas in the wake of the rise to power Taliban in Afghanistan. This article also analyses the implications for regional security and other issues of Iran's strategic thinking on Afghanistan, which would affect India's interests in the region and the scope for interaction between India, Iran and Afghanistan. This article offers, from an Iranian point of view, the regional security structure and its impact on Indo-Iran relations.

24. Nasirpour, G. (2019). Iran-India relations with future prospects. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 14(4), 165-187.

This article examines the Iran-India relationship and its prospects for cooperation. Considering political, economic and strategic aspects of the relationship, the author verifies this relationship. The author delves into some of the opportunities and challenges that both nation faces as their relationship develops. This paper presents the views of an Iranian intellectual perspective on the bilateral relations and reflects how Iran's soft power has shaped views in the Indian capital as its connection with India, including an evaluation of potential future ties between the two countries in various fields.

25. Rahman, K. (2010). Indo-Iranian relations and the current developments in the region. *Policy Perspectives*, 7(2), 27-49.

This article discusses India-Iran relations in the backdrop of shifting regional balances. The author demonstrates how developments in South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East regions impact their bilateral relations. This article analyses energy cooperation, regional security challenges and the implications of great power competition to India-Iran relations. The author offers a detailed exploration of the impact of regional politics on both opportunities and challenges that would most likely continue to characterise bilateral cooperation as well as the influences of a convoluting regional environment.

26. V. Suresh and K. Ramesh, (2015). India-Iran relations: Prospects and challenges. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*. Vol. 9(10), pp. 379-385, October 2015

This article analyses a multidimensional bilateral relationship, including economic cooperation, security cooperation and geopolitics. The author examines how both countries dealt with intricate international sanctions, their worries about energy security, and regional security considerations (especially in Afghanistan after 2014). It underscores India's strategic reliance on Iranian oil and the significance of Chabahar port for regional connectivity, while taking note of frictions due to Iran's nuclear programme and American sanctions. This article offers an objective view of the prospects and challenges in the Saudi-Russian relationship.

27. Sanjay Jain & Wajahat Abdullah (2019). India-Iran Relations in Post-Cold War Era: Problems and Prospects. Think Tank Journal, vol-2, Issue-14, Dec-2019

This article examines post-Cold War conditions for prospective regional allies. This article elucidates strategic, political and economic reasons for India to strive for a strong relationship with the Islamic Republic. It discusses geopolitical aspects, co-operation in energy, the war on terror and US influence on bilateral relations. This article provides a historical examination of how the conclusion of the Cold War created both new avenues for collaboration between India and Iran, as well as new limitations.

28. Roshandel, J. (2004). The long overdue strategic partnership between the two nations. In R. M. Hathaway (Ed.), Asia Program Special Report No. 120 (pp.16-20). Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.

The author examines an Iranian view of the India-Iran cooperation agreement signed in 2003. The author analyses why Iran has decided to engage more closely

with India, not only to export its energy, but also for economic partnership and common interests in Afghanistan. This article analyses why India is a crucial partner for Iran in international isolation, and makes headway in meeting its economic development targets despite Western sanctions. This article is particularly useful for its insights into Iranian strategic norms regarding the relationship.

29. Kumaraswamy, P. R. (2004). India, Iran and Israel: Dynamics of a triangular relationship. In R. M. Hathaway (Ed.), Asia Program Special Report 120. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.

This article explores the implications of India-Iran collaboration and New Delhi's economic and strategic relations with Israel. The author analyses India's delicate role in balancing Iran and Israel, like these bitter enemies. He examines how India can balance these competitive dynamics and implications for security trends in the Middle East and South Asia. This article usefully analyses the implications of India-Iran engagement in their other strategic partnerships in the region.

30. Fair, C. C. (2004). India and Iran strengthen security ties: More than just oil. In R. M. Hathaway (Ed.), Asia Program Special Report No. 120. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

The author's examination of the "strategic partnership" between India and Iran highlights several elements that render Iran attractive to New Delhi. Key areas of focus include energy collaboration, policies regarding Afghanistan, and the dynamics of regional security. Fair argues that, notwithstanding the influence of the US and diverging national interests, this bilateral relationship holds significant strategic value for both nations and is expected to persist. The author

emphasises that the ties between India and Iran extend beyond energy considerations to encompass wider security cooperation.

31. Yazdani, E. (2007). The changing nature of India-Iran relations in the post-Cold War period: A geo-political perspective. South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 30(2), 351-368.

This article provides a comprehensive geopolitical analysis that is India's association with Iran following the Cold War period. The author explores how the complex and intertwined geopolitical landscape has introduced new facets to their bilateral relations. It is argued that Iran harbours concerns regarding Pakistan's involvement with the Western Taliban regime, and the escalating violence against the Shiite minority in Sunni-dominated Pakistan has negatively influenced Iran-Pakistan ties. The author examines the collapse of the USSR and the rise of the Central Asian Republics, highlighting their significance for India as it loses direct access to Eurasia while China ascends as a regional competitor.

32. Naaz, F. (2001). Indo-Iranian relations 1947-2000. Strategic Analysis (published by IDSA).

This article explores the dynamics of the relationship between India and Iran from the period of India's independence through to the conclusion of the 20th century. The author notes that during the 1950s, the tension in relations was shaped by Iran's association with the Axis powers and India's stance in the Non-Alignment Movement. However, interactions remained positive throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with notable exceptions during Ayatollah Khomeini's regime. Furthermore, it highlights that after the Cold War, India and Iran found common ground due to shared perceptions of security threats. Iran was apprehensive about American ties with Arab nations and neighbouring countries perceived as

problematic. Meanwhile, India faced its own set of challenges stemming from geopolitical dynamics among nearby groupings, security concerns extending beyond its borders, and regional rivalries affecting various aspects such as energy supply, political changes in Afghanistan, geographical factors, and market relationships.

33. Naaz, F. (2001). Indo-Iranian relations: Key factors in the 1990s. Strategic Analysis.

This article examines significant aspects of Indo-Iranian relations during the 1990s. The author suggests that the conclusion of the Cold War coincided with the rise of "Pan-Americana" in West Asia fostered a shared desire for autonomy in foreign policy between India and Iran, leading to closer ties. The article highlights this paradoxical characteristic, which, aside from existing tensions, defined their interaction within the US-dominated global landscape post-Cold War. Key topics addressed include energy collaboration, Afghanistan—where both leaders advocated for a political resolution through a broad-based government—and Central Asia, where mutual interests centred on security and stability were evident.

34. Pant, H. V., & Super, J. M. (2013). Balancing rivals: India's tightrope between Iran and U.S. Asian Policy, 15, 145-159.

This article examines the intricate balance India maintains between its engagements with Iran and the formation of a strategic alliance with the United States. The authors analyse how India has navigated this fragile diplomatic landscape, particularly regarding Iran's nuclear program and international sanctions. They reflect on how India's energy security needs, interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and aspiration for strategic independence have

shaped its approach to Iran, even as Washington increases its influence. This article provides nuanced insights and detailed analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by India in managing this tripartite relationship and its implications for regional security.

35. Zakharov, A. (2023). Russian-Indian Connectivity via INSTC: Opportunities and Challenges. MGIMO Review of International Relations, 16 (2).

The prospects and challenges for connectivity of Russia with India via the International North South Transport Corridor are considered in this article. The author examines the way in which INSTC is a combined transport network that links South Asia to Central Asia, Russia and beyond to Europe, where Chabahar plays an important role as a node. The author analyses the economic and geopolitical relevance of this corridor for both countries. This article presents the Russian perspective on the trilateral collaboration among Iran and India, aimed at establishing alternative trade routes.

Objectives of the Study

The proposed research tends to address the following objectives:

1. To explore the contours of historical and civilizational aspects of relations between India and Iran.
2. To examine the changing nature and dynamics of the strategic and economic relations between India and Iran.
3. To study the context and role of external dynamics in India-Iran relations.
4. To analyse the nature of bilateral ties and agreements between India and Iran.

Research Methodology

The proposed research employs predominantly qualitative research methods, with a focus on both descriptive and analytical research. To address the core idea of this research, both primary and secondary data have been used. The interview method has been used as a tool for collecting primary data. The interview method included open-ended interview questions. Primary data sources include both states' diplomatic white papers, MoU agreements, and policy documents. On the contrary, secondary data for this research have been acquired from plenty of books, journal articles, monographs, and annual reports from international and regional organisations. Furthermore, NGO, think tank, and government official websites, as well as reputed newspapers from both states, have been utilised for secondary data sources.

Research Questions: -

In the process of the proposed research, the researcher has gone through the research questions:-

- 1) Why is the Islamic Republic of Iran strategically important for India?
- 2) How do the aspects of connectivity enhance economic prosperity and regional stability between India and Iran?
- 3) What are the components of soft power diplomacy between India and Iran?
- 4) What extent the role of external dynamics influences the India-Iran bilateral relations?
- 5) What are the various challenges in India-Iran bilateral relations?

Scope of the Research.

This research has comprehensively focused on the relations between India and Iran, addressing significant aspects of their interactions along with a pertinent theoretical framework.

Chapter I: Perspectives on India-Iran Bilateral Relations offers an examination of the historical context and structural dynamics of the relationship between India and Iran. This chapter delves into historical trajectories, policy consistencies, evolving trends, and broader regional and global contexts that have shaped this relationship.

Chapter II: Strategic Importance of Iran in India's Foreign Policy. This chapter will discuss the impact of Iran's strategic position on India's foreign policy. It analyses Iran's contribution to India's Central Asia strategy while considering how Iranian territory serves as a conduit for Indian interaction with post-Soviet states. It also addresses India's energy security and naval diplomacy development detailed assessment is provided on counter-terrorism cooperation, including intelligence sharing and border security, while also addressing concerns about extremist groups. Through a neorealist lens, this chapter illustrates how structural factors not only inform strategic conclusions but also shape perceptions regarding risks and partnership opportunities.

Chapter III: Connectivity and Bilateral Economic Security Issues presents an in-depth analysis of the interplay between infrastructure initiatives and economic relationships. The Chabahar Port development project is closely examined from

its inception through implementation, addressing various technical, financial, and political challenges while measuring outcomes against initial objectives. The International North-South Transport Corridor is similarly evaluated as a multilateral connectivity initiative with significant bilateral implications. This chapter addresses energy relations across different phases, including peak oil imports by India during sanctions periods, contraction due to sanctions effects, and potential recovery scenarios. Trade patterns, investment flows, banking dynamics, including new measures designed to circumvent sanctions, are discussed using Neoliberal Institutionalism to highlight institutional support for cooperation alongside Complex Interdependence to evaluate various economic channels.

Chapter IV: Soft Power Diplomacy in India-Iran Bilateral Relations explores non-material dimensions such as cultural exchanges, educational collaborations, diaspora connections, and interpersonal ties. It investigates how both countries utilise historical narratives to shape diplomatic rhetoric while assessing which narratives reinforce social bonds versus those that serve as strategic rhetorical tools. Detailed insights into cultural institutions are provided, along with discussions on student exchanges, artistic endeavours, literary links, Indian cinema's presence in Iran, and Persian influences on Indian languages, explored as indicators of cultural interdependence. Drawing upon Constructivist theory, this chapter examines identity formation processes and norm diffusion that influence bilateral perceptions while questioning whether cultural diplomacy constitutes meaningful relational foundations or merely superficial elements in a relationship driven by material interests.

Chapter V: External Factors Influencing India-Iran Bilateral Relations critically assesses how external entities affect bilateral dynamics. The United States predominantly captures attention due to its substantial impact on economic relations, coupled with pressure exerted on India to reduce ties with Iran. This chapter reviews US policy alongside India's responses to American pressures, including negotiations over waivers related to sanctions. Furthermore, China's growing involvement with Iran is analysed in detail concerning strategic partnerships and extensive investment commitments that carry implications for both Indian interests and its overall role in the region. Saudi Arabia, as a regional competitor vying for Indian engagement, is also evaluated amid their rivalry affecting Indian policymaking despite Iranian resistance towards Israel emerging as a close ally for India. Russia's trilateral partnership prospects involving India, along with Pakistan's ongoing attempts at undermining Indian efforts in Iran. Afghanistan's role is considered essential in facilitating cooperation between India and Iran.

Chapter VI: Challenges Facing India-Iran Relations. There are numerous obstacles that India encounters in its approach to Iran. Iran has shown a lack of sensitivity to various matters that hold significant importance for India. The Bilateral relations between India and Iran have suffered from numerous challenges and limitations coming out of the volatile nature of geopolitics involving great powers and regional power competitions to have their foothold.

The concluding chapter has analysed the findings of the proposed research and suggested measures to strengthen the bilateral relations between the two countries.

From 1991 to 2022, the relationship between India and Iran exemplifies a successful international partnership that has flourished despite significant challenges. Rooted in ancient traditions yet shaped by contemporary factors such as strategic imperatives, economic interests. This connection underscores the intricate nature of international relations in the period following the Cold War. The multiple dimensions of the India-Iran relationship are examined as how strategic motives, economic ties, institutional frameworks, cultural factors, and external limitations converge to affect cooperation between India and Iran. Ultimately, this research argues that analysing the issues and implications surrounding the India-Iran relationship cannot be effectively achieved through a single theoretical lens and simplified interactions. Rather than being characterised by rigid ideologies, it reflects the diverse nature of modern international relations. Contemporary states engage in various complex initiatives simultaneously while employing different strategies to navigate competing influences. They continually negotiate pressures while collaborating to achieve distinct objectives, even when their interests diverge significantly and particular aspects of their relationship face serious obstacles. As both India and Iran evolve within an ever-changing global landscape, emerging as increasingly significant regional powers with aspirations for greater global influence, the dynamics of managing cooperation alongside rivalry become even more crucial.

Chapter-I

Perspectives on India-Iran bilateral relations

India-Iran relations stand out as a distinct phenomenon in the prismatic world of international relations, deftly wrapped around contemporary geopolitics. The India-Iran relations have a history that stretches from ancient Persia to today's Indo-Persian or Persiano-Indian relationship, covering more than three millennia of interactions, which have been transformed into a strategic partnership in the contemporary era.¹ The time period from 1991–2022 is a crucial period for Indo-Iranian relations, during which India's economy was liberalising, and Iran was consolidating itself after the Iranian revolution and within which the world order dramatically shifted as a result of the conclusion of the Cold War era. The period of 30 years saw unparalleled grounds for bilateral cooperation and complex challenges posed by international sanctions, regional wars and competing strategic coalitions.² India's ties with Iran have been driven by number of compelling factors, including India's increasing energy needs and Iran's abundant hydrocarbon resources, interlocking security concerns with respect to terrorism as well as regional security, common stakes in the stability of Afghanistan, desire for access to Central Asia and connectivity between South and Central Asia. This relationship has also been significantly constrained - notably by India's changing ties with the United States, international sanctions against Iran, and complex regional relations between Pakistan, China and the Gulf states.³

Historical and Civilizational Perspective

India – Iran relations are rooted in pre-historical links which date back to the early 7th century, when both states were part of historic empires since antiquity. Persians have had a strong influence on Indian culture since they ruled the country for several centuries. The intricate picture of that history from the interactions of the Achaemenid Empire with ancient Indian states to the Persian ancestry of the Mughals presents a historical base on which relations between India and Iran can

be built.⁴ The profound cultural and civilizational affinities between India and Iran, offer special underpinnings for enhancing ties beyond short-term political and economic calculations. Persian undertow on Indian languages and literature, architecture and cuisines that naturally lend themselves to people-to-people links.⁵ Educational and cultural exchanges have continued relatively unaffected by political restrictions, even when formal relations became more limited. The setting up of departments for Persian in Indian universities and of Indian studies in Iranian institutions is there to testify to the enduring academic interest in bilateral cultural ties.⁶ The mutual respect for poetry, arts and philosophical traditions opens the door to opportunities of “soft power” cultural diplomacy that might reinforce those broader bilateral relationships. The joint celebrations of popular cultural icons and literary heritage lay the groundwork for stronger people-to-people linkages.⁷

Strategic and security dimensions

Relations in the contemporary era between India and Iran were formed in 1947 when India gained independence from the British Raj; it is considered a continuation of historical relations. The friendship between India and Iran in the early years of independence was based on Cold War politics. With Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi as king, Iran aligned itself with Western powers, while India adopted a non-aligned approach that leaned towards the Soviet Union.⁸

The disintegration of the USSR in 1991 opened up new space for India and Iran to redefine their relationship without interfering to the bipolar competitions. For India, the end of Cold War required a major re-assessment of its foreign policy priorities, and Iran was recovering from the distress caused by an intense eight-year conflict with Iraq that lasted from 1980 to 1988. This phase was marked by search for economic revival and normalization of its relations with rest of the world.⁹ The first major diplomatic breakthrough occurred when Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited New Delhi in April 1993 and the counterpart

Dinesh Singh paid a visit to Tehran. The diplomatic exchanges laid the groundwork for increased India-Iran cooperation in different areas, including trade, energy and regional security.¹⁰ India's "Look West" policy of the early 1990s also identified Iran as a key partner for opening up trade routes to Central Asian markets and resources. The importance of Iran's geography, as a connecting pillar between South Asia, Central Asia and the West Asia, came into greater focus for Indian policymakers who were seeking alternative overland transport routes and to rely less on Pakistan for regional connectivity.¹¹

During this period, the groundwork for the energy cooperation was established through the signing of the first oil purchase contracts in 1994. Iran's substantial reserves, totaling 157 billion barrels of oil and 34 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, present a compelling opportunity for India as it seeks to fulfill its energy requirements.¹² India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) initiated a dialogue with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) on its possible upstream investments in Iran, paving the way for bilateral cooperation over energy resources. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its pullout from Afghanistan in 1989 and the ensuing Afghan civil war brought about new strategic dilemmas, as well as potential advantages for both India and Iran. Taliban's rise and regional security were a matter of concern for both the countries. Iran's backing of the Persian-speaking Tajiks and Hazaras that made up the Northern Alliance coincided with India's strategic interest in thwarting Pakistan-sponsored Taliban from consolidating their control over Afghanistan.¹³ The common worry for the future of Afghanistan became a cornerstone of Indo-Iranian strategic partnership witnessed by humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees and supportive of resistance against Taliban rule. Creation of the Tehran-Delhi-Kabul Axis was one of the earliest examples of regional cooperation involving three nations.¹⁴

Trade began to grow in the mid-1990s. Bilateral trade between India and Iran surged from approximately \$200 million in 1990 to over six times that amount by 1995, with Indian imports of crude oil accounting for most of that growth while Iranian purchases of Indian pharmaceuticals, textiles, and agricultural products also played a major role.¹⁵ A mechanism of cooperation also facilitated the enhancement of economic cooperation, as the Iran-Indian Joint Commission was formed in 1997. The focus of cooperation in the economic sector would be petrochemicals, IT, pharmaceutical and engineering products.¹⁶ Indian investment in Iranian industry started with companies like Tata Group seeking to develop steel and auto mobile business. The time phase 1999 saw the signing of a MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) between Industrial Development and Renovation Organization of Iran (IDRO) and Confederation of Indian Industry for the expansion of cooperation in industrial fields.¹⁷

When Iranian President Mohammad Khatami visited India in Jan 2003, it was an obvious turning point of their relationship. During the visit, the New Delhi Declaration was signed and the relationship was upgraded to a "strategic partnership" involving broad-based cooperation in political, economic, defense and cultural fields.¹⁸ The Delhi Declaration expressed their common desire for regional peace, stability and development on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty, independence. The strategic partnership framework also called for expanded bilateral cooperation in a number of areas, including energy security involving the planned Iran- Pakistan-India gas pipeline, connectivity initiatives primarily relating to the North-South Transport Corridor, defense cooperation, and joint action in fighting terrorism and narcotics trade. It also stressed that reconstruction and stabilization in Afghanistan were crucial for peace in the region.¹⁹

The Iran–Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline is reputedly the ' flagship energy idea of Indo-Iranian cooperation in the 21st century. The 2,775-km pipeline for

transmission of Iranian natural gas to India through Pakistan, the IPI project was an enormous opportunity and at the same time a big challenge.²⁰ In the year 2005, the two countries signed initial deals to import 60 million cubic meters per day of Iranian gas for a quarter century. The IPI pipeline project encountered with several hurdles, including price squabbles, security fears over the Pakistan leg of the transit route and mounting international pressure over Iran's nuclear program.²¹ However, India and Iran kept negotiating over the decade with terms evolving in different ways regarding pricing formulas and the means of delivery. Ultimately, the project's floundering was indicative of wider pressures stemming from international sanctions and regional security exigencies.²²

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) -established formally in 2000 with India, Iran and Russia being prominent partners to connect through east-west linkages.²³ The initiative was intended to provide a multimodal transit system that could link Indian ports to the Central Asian and European markets through Iran in 40-60 days as compared to the 14-20 days which would be required when goods were transported via it, and would reduce shipping and transportation costs up to 30 per cent. India's \$85-million investment in the development of Iran's Chabahar Port in Sistan-Balochistan province was, therefore, key to operationalising INSTC. The Chabahar port held significant strategic value, serving not only economic purposes but also facilitating India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia while circumventing Pakistan.²⁴

Indian oil firms made huge inroads into Iran's upstream energy sector at that time. Pars field, the Yadavaran Field (2002), Farsi - Acreh, the North Pars gasfield (2005) were all procured by ONGC Videsh Limited – an Indian overseas company of Oil and Natural Gas Corporation.²⁵ These investments of over 3 billion dollars underscore India's longstanding commitment to energy cooperation facing with a growing international pressure. The Farzad-B gas field find by OVL 2008 was a landmark in the Indian upstream industry's venture into

Iran. The field, with estimated reserves of 12.8tn cubic feet of natural gas, was potential game-changer for India in terms of its energy security.²⁶ Nevertheless, the timeline of development and investment framework were complicated by the international sanctions.

Military cooperation between India and Iran developed significantly during that time including intelligence sharing, joint maritime security efforts as well as technology sharing. The operational jointness between Indian naval forces and their Iranian counterparts at the exercises in the waters of the Persian Gulf pointed to increasing convergence.²⁷ Both had common maritime security concerns in the Arabian Sea and piracy threats to vital shipping lanes. Regular maritime security dialogues enabled coordination in areas from drugs to counter-terrorism.²⁸ Intelligence collaboration was, moreover, dominated by the Afghanistan file with both these countries exchanging information on Taliban movements and drug trafficking networks as well as on the movement of refugees. This collaboration has proven to be particularly advantageous following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, as both India and Iran supported the Northern Alliance in its opposition to the Taliban.²⁹

A decade later, their relationship had grown drastically with trade of \$13.7 billion during 2008-09, and Iran was one of the top fifteen trading partners of India.³⁰ Indian exports to Iran expanded into non-traditional areas such as engineering products, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and IT services. Crude oil was the largest item of export from Iran to India during 2018-19 and accounted for more than 85% of the total export. Setting up Iranian banks in India and Indian banks representative offices in Iran also aided trade financing and cut transaction charges. The UCO Bank's Tehran branch which was established in 2004, played a vital role connecting the two countries on trade transactions.³¹ Indian pharmaceutical firms enjoyed great success in the Iranian market, with major companies such as Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, Cipla and Sun Pharma being well

established. India-Iran Pharmaceuticals Joint Venture (2007) was expected to exploit the Indian capabilities in the manufacture of generic drugs combined with the market opportunities available in Iran.³²

The strategic partnership included substantial cultural and educational components testifying to the deep civilisational bonds. Indian Cultural Centers were set up in Tehran and Isfahan which served as a site for cultural exchanges, including art shows, film festivals and literary events.³³ Academic collaboration broadened to include contracts for academic and student exchange, joint research schemes, and cooperative programs leading to a shared degree. The Persian Studies programme of Jamia Millia Islamia University and the Indian Studies centre at Tehran University emerged as centers of academic collaboration.³⁴

The ratcheting up of international sanctions on Iran after UN Security Council Resolution 1929 (2010) as well as unilateral sanctions by the US and EU dramatically transformed the context of Indo-Iranian ties.³⁵ These overall sanctions included an energy sector, banking system, and foreign trade-level names that had never been experienced before for bilateral cooperation. Indian energy imports from Iran reached 400,000 barrels per day by 2010, with Iran becoming India's second largest oil supplier after Saudi Arabia, but decreased significantly as a result of the sanctions.³⁶ The exclusion of Iranian banks from the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) global payment system made trade financing more difficult, while a ban on Iranian shipping companies added new uncertainty to long-standing supply chains. For India's policymakers, the task was a difficult balancing between energy security, strategic partnerships and secondary sanctions that could have implications for other Indian economic interests. Alternative payment systems coming into play and declining in oil import from Iran were manifestation of this complicated strategic calculus.³⁷

The banking restrictions required alternative modes of payment to continue with bilateral trade. Iran started accepting India's rupees to pay for its oil in 2012 under an arrangement known as the rupee-rial trade mechanism, where Indian importers paid UCO Bank and IDBI bank who had accounts with Iranian banks, while at the same time, funds were also held back in escrow accounts which Iran could use for purchasing goods from India.³⁸ This mechanism, allowed for continued trade, had significant asymmetries as Iranian imports from India were much lower than Indian oil imports from Iran. Vast sums, in excess of \$6 billion in rupee payments, were sitting in Indian banks by 2013 which further illustrated the structural hurdles to doing bilateral trade without regular banking lines.³⁹ The Turkish Halkbank channel offered a way to evade some of these transactions, as did gold exports from India to Iran which grew substantially in order to act as a credit offset mechanism. The transactions, which were legal under the sanctions programs, demonstrated the creative work-arounds both nations have devised to preserve commercial links.⁴⁰

The strategic cooperation had long delayed during sanctions. The Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline was virtually shelved from the Indian side in 2010 and it, formally, withdrew from the tripartite agreement to build the 7.8-billion-dollar line up under US pressure in 2014 over commercial-obstacles including pricing of the gas which were intrinsically linked to its own geopolitical considerations.⁴¹ The decision combined both concerns related to sanctions and the way that India appraised project feasibility given extant international circumstances. Clean energy development hindered by Sanctions, ONGC's development of the Farzad-B gas field was also affected by sanctions access to enhanced drilling technology and international financing being compromised. Despite being a strategically important asset for obtaining energy security for India, the project was still in exploratory stages during the sanctions.⁴² Development of the Chabahar Port was also delayed, but India remained committed to pursuing the project as a key

connectivity aspect. Strategic significance of Chabahar as a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia continued Indian interest notwithstanding with technical difficulties.⁴³

Even as sanctions placed limits on the relationship, the two countries continued to engage with high level of bilateral diplomacy. The presence of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Non-Aligned Movement Summit in New Delhi (2012) and his bilateral talks with India showed that Tehran was keen to continue strategic talk at any cost.⁴⁴ Statements during External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna's visit to Tehran in 2013 reiterating India's position on strategic partnership facilitated some areas of cooperation. The institution of regular consultations at the level of foreign secretaries, brought an institutional continuity during such testing times.⁴⁵ Especially the diplomatic dimension was concentrated in regional questions such as Afghanistan's future after withdrawal from NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) plans and issues of terrorism within the region. The two countries also worked to synchronize their positions on the future of Afghanistan, including urging an inclusive government and respect for minority rights.⁴⁶

Trade between the two countries had dropped dramatically during most of the crippling sanctions era, from \$13.7 billion in 2008-09 to about \$4 billion in 2014-15.⁴⁷ However, trade patterns of both countries adjusted to sanctions restrictions and greater shares of non-sanctioned goods and services were pursued. After quite a drop, the exports to Iran from Indian pharmaceuticals stayed roughly flat because of humanitarian safety valves in sanction regimes. Companies such as Dr. Reddy's, Cipla and Lupin remained active in their markets through local partnerships and adjusted distribution networks.⁴⁸ This era of sanctions also saw expanded collaboration in domains such as information technology services, traditional medicine, and agricultural research.⁴⁹

The restrictions imposed on Iranian oil bring forward India's quest to diversify energy security. Indian oil firms deepened investments in upstream assets around the world, ranging from Africa to Latin America and Central Asia while lifting direct imports from time-honoured Middle Eastern suppliers.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, India did not import a lot of oil from Iran during the period of sanctions against that country, partly due to energy security but mainly due to high-level political commitment to the bilateral relationship. The level of imports varied with magnitude of sanctions and international diplomatic developments.⁵¹ The sanctions highlighted the vulnerability of energy-dependent relationships to international political developments and reinforced Indian policymakers' emphasis on supply diversification and domestic energy development.⁵²

India's relationship with Iran is played out amidst a complicated matrix of regional and global geopolitical circumstances that strongly determine the prospects for bilateral cooperation. The principal obstacle has been the international sanctions, which have intervened to block cycles of collaboration time and again and compel both nations to cobble together new mechanisms with which they can keep their relationship alive.⁵³ The triangular relationship among India, the USA and Iran is a geo-strategic reality. The burgeoning relationship between India and the United States in defence, technology and economy puts India at odds with maintaining a cosy partnership with Iran.⁵⁴ The balancing act in these relationships has posed challenges for both, needing adept diplomatic management and willingness to accept some limitations to Indo-Iranian cooperation! Indo-Iranian relations were further complicated due to regional dynamics vis-à-vis Pakistan, China and the Gulf states. Strategic relations both with China and the USA, as well as its troubled relations with Iran determine regional connectivity possibilities and security collaboration frameworks.⁵⁵ China's expanding economic ties with Iran under the BRI provide both opportunities and challenges to Indian interests in Iran.

India's Changing Relations with Iran, 1991–2022: What India's relationship with Iran from 1991 until today tells us about how great regional powers can to a considerable extent, have their way despite ongoing external challenges and geopolitical predicaments. The dynamics of this relationship in different periods post-Cold War rapprochement, sanctions-driven constraints, and recurrent thaw thus illustrate resilience as well as limitations when faced with the broader international political landscape.⁵⁶ The strategic edifice of Indo-Iranian relations lies on strong mutual imperatives: India's growing energy needs and Iran's enormous hydrocarbon resources, common security concerns, complementary economic strengths, as well as deep historical and cultural ties. These basic ingredients have sustained stability even in times of lesser cooperation, remaining fertile ground for further cooperative growth.⁵⁷

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Chapter-II

Strategic Importance of Iran in India's Foreign Policy.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a significant moment in global history, leading to major consequences for the foreign policies of various nation-states. For India, it was a period of economic liberalisation and pragmatism in international relations, in contrast to the earlier ideological non-alignment of the Cold War. In this new, post-1991 complex of international sanctions, tension between regional powers and great power rivalry systems, Iran became a strategically important partner for India. The India-Iran equation is one of the most fascinating instances of practical diplomacy in modern international affairs. These are two starkly different political systems, religious orientations and global alliances, yet they maintain a constant commitment to strengthening mutually beneficial relations. The importance of Iran for India is not only bilateral, but also encompasses other strategic dimensions involving energy security, regional connectivity, balance of power calculus in South and West Asia and the emergence of India as a significant power in the Indo-Pacific area.

Several factors accounted for India's stance towards Iran during this critically formative decade. First, the conclusion of the Cold War made it essential to reassess India's foreign affairs in general and its relationship with countries that used to be perceived as part of superpower competition. Even the revolutionary Islamic state of Iran offered transcendent opportunities for cooperation in spite of ideological differences. But second, the start of India's economic liberalisation process raised new requirements for energy security and market diversification: Iran's immense hydrocarbon endowments began looking more and more appealing. Third, the new security threats that were emerging in Afghanistan and the larger region made cooperation with Iran an imperative from the standpoint of strategic necessity for stabilising India's extended neighbourhood.¹

Defining the Geostrategic Importance of States

The perception of a region as having geostrategic significance involves the economic, political, and military interests of a state. These interests are crucial for a nation that utilises all accessible resources to safeguard its national objectives. The strategic importance of regions can vary based on their size, geographic position, and demographic strength. A country's geostrategic relevance is interpreted through its geographic location. Additionally, the geopolitical importance of a nation is influenced by geographical factors that enhance its power on the global stage due to locational benefits. At the regional level, geo-strategy and geopolitics provide various economic, political, and strategic advantages. Iran holds critical importance due to its population density, vast resources, cultural identity, historical background, and pivotal location between the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea, which facilitates economic and spatial connections between the West and East.²

Iran serves as a crucial geopolitical pivot due to its strategic geographical location, which either enhances access to vital areas or restricts resource availability for key global players. Alongside nations like Ukraine, Azerbaijan, South Korea, and Turkey, Iran stands out as a significant actor in international affairs. In the realm of Eurasian geopolitics, Brzezinski emphasises Iran's capacity for political variety in Central Asia and its significant influence along the eastern shoreline of the Persian Gulf. He points out that Iran and Turkey are both attempting to extend their influence in the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia. Nevertheless, their capacity to bring about significant alterations in the regional power dynamics is limited by domestic challenges.³

Iran's advantageous location at the convergence of the energy-abundant Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf regions enables it to wield significant influence over the shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf. This site acts as a link between the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, facilitating access to the Indian Ocean through multiple

land routes and ports, including Chabahar. Highlighting Iran's crucial geostrategic role, Robert Kaplan posits that while the Middle East functions as a pivotal area for Afro-Eurasia, often referred to as the World-Island, Iran is essentially the region's own universal joint. He contends that Halford Mackinder's concept of a geographic pivot, Traditionally linked to the Central Asian steppes, it would be more appropriate to relocate this designation to include the Iranian plateau. Iran's control over vital geography in the Middle East, characterised by its strategic location, population density, and energy resources, underscores its importance in global geopolitical dynamics.⁴

Map 2.1 Geo-Strategic Location of The Islamic Republic of Iran



Source: <https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/iran>

Both Kaplan and Brzezinski highlight the importance of geography in comprehending Iran's ongoing strategic impact and importance. Furthermore, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) expands on the concept of pivot

states, pointing out that military, economic, and ideological factors are crucial in determining Iran's strategic significance. According to the HCSS center, pivot states are situated within the overlapping domains of influence exerted by major powers, characterized by various forms of collaboration including military and economic agreements, cultural connections, trade in arms and goods, and dialogue. Changes in the structural and political landscape of a pivot state carry significant consequences for both regional and global security. Iran, in particular, is actively engaged in shaping its immediate security context, highlighting the wider implications of its ideological stance and future outlook. Geographically, Iran lies at the crossroads of three pivotal regions: the Middle East, South Asia, and post-Soviet areas. For New Delhi, these regions—along with the northern Indian Ocean—are vital to India's strategic and economic interests.⁵

Importance of Iran in India's Extended Neighbourhood Policy

India's concept of an expansive neighbourhood policy encompasses the country's efforts to assert its influence, whether through military and economic strength (hard power) or through cultural and ideological initiatives (soft power).⁶ India's Extended Neighbourhood policy is structured around a geostrategic framework consisting of three concentric and expanding circles of engagement. The central circle encompasses South Asia, which extends from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east. Leveraging its demographic and geographic advantages, India assumes a pivotal role in South Asia, aiming for dominance while attempting to reduce external influences.⁷

The second circle encompasses the broader neighborhood, which comprises regions adjacent to South Asia, including West Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean area. Within this framework, India aims to "counteract the influence of other powers and protect its interests from being compromised."⁸

The third circle encompasses the entire globe, symbolising India's ambitions as a global power. It illustrates India's awareness that its strategic interests and obligations reach well beyond its immediate surroundings. Within this framework, India seeks to actively influence global affairs, address issues of international importance, and engage in global decision-making processes. India perceives itself not merely as a regional entity but as a significant participant on the world stage, advocating for its national priorities, fostering peace and stability, and building alliances with nations across the globe. This expansive viewpoint underscores India's desire to be a responsible and impactful player in tackling the intricate challenges and opportunities presented in the twenty-first century. Following the Cold War, India's political, economic, and defence relations with its extended neighbourhood have grown stronger. This intensified engagement marks the "beginning of the reassertion of India's historically constructive and stabilising role in these areas based on the exchange of ideas and commercial goods."⁹ In this framework, West Asia holds significant importance regarding India's concept of an extended neighbourhood. In 2005, India introduced the Look West policy, recognising the Gulf region as part of its natural economic surroundings, similar to South-East and South Asia. Iran stands out as India's nearest geographical neighbour within the Gulf, endowed with crucial resources, political influence, and a strategic position that makes it essential for protecting India's interests in West Asia. The significance of Iran in shaping India's policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan is considerable, as evidenced by the structure of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which categorises Iran alongside Pakistan and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Iran's role as a link between Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus with the Indian Ocean adds another critical aspect to India's strategic involvement.¹⁰

Geo-Strategic Location of Iran

Iran occupies an area of 1,648 million square kilometres, ranking it as the 18th largest country in the world. Its size surpasses that of several European nations combined, including Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, and Portugal. Additionally, Iran is larger than both Pakistan and Turkey. Geographically located in the southwestern region of Asia, Iran shares its borders with Armenia, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and the Caspian Sea to the north, Turkey and Iraq to the west, and Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east. Due to its strategic location and access to vital waterways such as the Persian Gulf and control over the Strait of Hormuz, Iran holds significant importance under India's Act East Policy. This advantage also extends to its energy resources, particularly natural gas.

As the second-largest gas producer globally, Iran plays a crucial role for India in diversifying its energy supplies within West Asia while fostering relations with Gulf nations. Situated at a crossroads for key international transport corridors, including the International North-South Corridor, East-West Corridor, Europe-Caucasus-Asia Corridor, and Asia Land Transportation Infrastructure Development Corridor, Iran is pivotal for India's economic and strategic interests in this area. Its geographic positioning also serves as a gateway to Central Asia.

The East-West Corridor facilitates connections between China and Iran through Uzbekistan. The Europe-Caucasus-Asia corridor enhances land connectivity across Eurasia. It began development in 1993 with Iran as a member of this project. In 1992, the Asia Land Transportation Infrastructure Development Project was initiated. This encompasses both Northern and Central Corridors. The South Asia Corridor links India to Iran via Pakistan. After that, continuing to

Europe through Turkey. The aim of these corridors is to enhance connectivity among countries in East, West, and South Asian countries. Iran plays an essential role in this corridor. This corridor is vital for India's Act West Policy.¹¹

Connectivity Dimensions

Chabahar is situated in the Sistan-Baluchistan province of Iran. This port, located alongside the Gulf of Oman, provides direct access to the Indian Ocean, thereby circumventing the Strait of Hormuz. This geographical advantage enables faster and safer entry for large cargo ships, establishing it as the nearest Iranian port to India. Chabahar enhances maritime access for landlocked countries in Central Asia and Afghanistan, reinforcing its position as an important hub for commercial transportation. It presents a more efficient and cost-effective alternative to conventional land routes through Pakistan, avoiding Gwadar harbour and its associated trade channels. This is especially crucial for Afghanistan, which depends significantly on external transport routes for its trade activities. In 2003, India, Afghanistan, and Iran strengthened their collaboration by signing the Chabahar port agreement within the framework of the North-South Transport Corridor initiative.¹²

The Chabahar project carries significant importance for Iran on two fronts. Currently, Iran operates a sole port in Bandar Abbas, which is unable to handle larger container vessels. Enhancing this port is expected to foster development in Sistan-Baluchestan, the least developed province in Iran. Chabahar's importance also lies in its potential to bridge the geographical gap created by Pakistan and to revive the historical ties between Iran and India. Additionally, it is vital for bolstering India's position in Afghanistan and enhancing its standing among the Afghan populace by facilitating a direct route from India through Iran to Afghanistan. This connection diminishes Pakistan's influence over the Afghan

economy and constrains its sphere of influence. India has previously accused Pakistan of deliberately hindering trade routes from Karachi to Afghanistan. Furthermore, this initiative allows India to limit Pakistan's strategic advantage stemming from its geographic location.

The Chabahar project establishes a direct link between India and Iran, thereby connecting with Afghanistan as well. This undermines Pakistan's efforts to restrict Indian access to both Iran and Afghanistan. The project aims to integrate the western Indian ports with trade routes that connect southern India, the Indian Ocean region, Iran, and Central Asia, anticipating an uplift in commerce between these areas. India's western coastline is set to realise its full potential by creating direct links between its major ports and Iran, along with commercial pathways extending through Iran towards Central Asia and Russia. Both India's and Iran's domestic economies stand to gain significantly from this venture. Ultimately, the Chabahar port project offers India opportunities for increased investments in Iran while also enhancing bilateral trade volumes.

In the context of connectivity, Chabahar Port plays an important role in the configuration of regional connectivity and stability. The Chabahar ocean port, due to its function in establishing fast connections with the peripheral regions of India, changed into a focal point in the geopolitical policies of this country. Furthermore, as an important means of advancing economic and regional policies of India in Asia, the Chabahar port has been at the centre of the country's attention. Since Iran is the supplier of an important part of India's required oil and gas, and at the same time, due to its location in a special geographical position, it facilitates Indo-Eurasian communication. For this reason, it can be said that India's interest in investing in the Chabahar ocean port is an important factor in India's foreign policy to reach the Eurasian regions.¹³

Chabahar holds significant potential to serve as an essential connection within the International North South Corridor (INSTC). This corridor, established by India,

Iran, and Russia in September 2000, was designed to enhance connectivity with the landlocked Central Asian Republics. Subsequently, 11 additional countries became involved. The existing route enables cargo transport from Mumbai (India) to Bandar Abbas (Iran) via sea, from Bandar Abbas to Bandar-e Anzali by road, then by ship from Bandar-e Anzali to Astrakhan, a port in Russia along the Caspian Sea, and finally from Astrakhan further into the Russian Federation and Europe using Russian railways. The INSTC commenced operations in June 2022 when the first cargo departed from Solyanka, a port area in Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea, arriving at Nhava Sheva in Navi Mumbai, known as Jawaharlal Nehru Port, India's largest container terminal. With its implementation and India's presence at Chabahar port, extending a segment of the INSTC to Chabahar could greatly benefit India's efforts to establish multiple connectivity routes throughout the region, leading up to Europe.¹⁴

The Chabahar port project, a cornerstone of India-Iran cooperation, symbolises their shared vision of enhancing regional connectivity and economic integration. This project not only supports India's strategic interests by facilitating access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without going through Pakistan, but it also corresponds with Iran's aspirations to establish itself as a central transit hub in the region. Chabahar port, despite exemptions granted to facilitate humanitarian and trade interests. India's capacity to address these challenges while upholding its obligations to Iran demonstrates the complex balancing required by its involvement in multiple international relationships.¹⁵

India's engagement with Iran's Chabahar port presents various opportunities. To fulfil its energy needs, India seeks alternatives to navigate around Pakistan. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-India (TAPI) oil pipeline project has now been redirected to connect Afghanistan directly with India through Chabahar port. This modification allows for the transport of petroleum and gas from Iran, Oman, and Central Asian nations to India's western coastal seaport.¹⁶

The Chabahar port project represents a vital aspect of the collaboration between India and Iran, embodying their mutual goal of improving regional connectivity and economic integration. This project not only advances India's strategic objectives by granting access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without going through Pakistan but also supports Iran's aspirations to establish itself as a key transit hub in the region. However, the broader multilateral dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, shaped by the strategic priorities of the U.S. and its allies, add layers of complexity to this alliance. The U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran have created considerable obstacles for the development of the Chabahar port, even with specific exemptions intended to promote humanitarian and trade activities. India's capacity to manage these difficulties while upholding its obligations to Iran illustrates the delicate balancing act required by its broader international commitments. Additionally, strategic considerations within the western Indo-Pacific affect India's energy security and economic interests, with Iran being a significant oil supplier. The enforcement of U.S. sanctions has led India to seek diversification in its energy sources, thereby influencing the economic aspects of India-Iran relations. Despite these hurdles, India has aimed to maintain its connection with Iran through initiatives such as the Rupee-Rial trading system and investments in infrastructure projects.¹⁷

Iran's Potentials of Energy Resources

Iran holds significant importance for India that extends beyond the Chabahar port and the connectivity it facilitates to Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics, especially since India's land access via Pakistan is restricted. The relevance of Iran stems from its strategic location, extensive size, rich history, and influential role within the region. Together with Iraq, it occupies nearly the entire northern coastline of the Persian Gulf, serving as a crucial link to the Levant, Central Asia, and South Asia while also being a vast reservoir of natural resources.

From a geopolitical perspective, Iran possesses a civilizational history and has undergone substantial political development over centuries, contributing to its economic and military capabilities as a regional power. Its capacity to control maritime traffic through the narrow Strait of Hormuz carries significant economic and geopolitical consequences not only for neighbouring areas but also on a global scale due to potential disruptions in critical energy supplies.

Iran's economic strength is primarily derived from its energy reserves. According to the US Department of Energy, it boasts the third-largest oil reserves and second-largest natural gas reserves worldwide. As of recent estimates, Iran's total oil reserves are around 209 billion barrels, while its natural gas reserves stand at approximately 33,988 billion cubic meters. By late 2021, Iran represented 24 percent of West Asia's oil reserves and accounted for 12 per cent of global reserves. In terms of production ranking within the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Iran was positioned as the fifth largest crude oil producer in 2021 while holding the title of third largest natural gas producer globally in 2020.¹⁸

Iran and Indo-Pacific Dimensions

Iran's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific region is complex, stemming from its geographical, economic, and political factors. Located at the convergence of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, Iran holds a crucial position that connects the energy-abundant Persian Gulf to the essential maritime routes of the Indian Ocean. This geographic context elevates Iran's role within broader Indo-Pacific strategies, acting as an important bridge between these regions.

Economically, Iran's significance further bolsters its strategic standing. As a prominent producer of oil and gas, Iran wields considerable power in global energy markets. Its vast reserves and central location render it an essential energy supplier to key economies within the Indo-Pacific, notably China and India.

Additionally, Iran's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) enhances its strategic relevance by promoting infrastructure development and trade links across the Indo-Pacific. This not only facilitates regional connectivity but also fosters economic integration with other nations in the area, thereby augmenting its geopolitical influence.

Moreover, Iran's military capabilities and alliances emphasise its critical role within the region. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is instrumental in projecting Iranian power throughout the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, Iran's strategic collaborations with Russia and China introduce complexities into regional dynamics by challenging existing power structures traditionally led by the United States and its allies. These alliances are reshaping geopolitical relations, establishing Iran as a significant actor in the evolving power equilibrium of the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁹

In the Indo-Pacific context, Iran's relationships with Russia, India, and China, along with its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), illustrate the shift towards a multi-polar world. This dynamic allows Iran to establish strategic alliances and engage in regional projects, thereby enhancing its influence on global politics. As a result, Iran is positioning itself as a significant actor in the Indo-Pacific, capable of impacting the evolving power dynamics within the area. The country's strategic relevance in this region is derived from a combination of its geographic location, economic capabilities, military strength, and geopolitical partnerships. The concept of multi-polarity provides a modern analytical lens through which to examine the various aspects of Iran's involvement in this crucial area. As the Indo-Pacific increasingly becomes a focal point for global geopolitics, Iran's role will continue to be essential in shaping both regional and international relations.²⁰

India's Act East policy, along with its focus on maritime security, has been crucial in influencing the dynamics of the region. Brahma Chellaney notes that India's

strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific extends beyond merely countering China's dominance; it also aims to safeguard its own economic and security priorities. This strategy has fostered relationships with nations such as Japan, Australia, and the United States through collaborative efforts like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue serves as a notable multilateral initiative aimed at fostering a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, highlighting a collective dedication to upholding the rule of law, ensuring freedom of navigation, and respecting national sovereignty.²¹

The security dimension in India-Iran relations has transformed since 1991, spurred by shared threat perceptions, common strategic imperatives and the complex evolving security context in South Asia and West Asia. Both countries have also grappled with terrorism, extremism and regional instability. They share commonalities in security considerations and approaches toward ensuring stability in the region.²²

Afghanistan has been the main theatre for India-Iran strategic partnership well into the post-1991 era. Both countries had opposed the Taliban's assumption of power in the 1990s and supported the Northern Alliance during that country's civil war. This collaboration increased after Al-Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attacks and the later US invasion of Afghanistan. Both India and Iran invested in post-war Afghanistan; the former became one of its largest non-military aid donors while the latter opened many trade routes, a wormhole through which came to idea Pakistan-Iran-India gas pipeline.²³

Common Indian and Iranian interests in Afghanistan residue from both countries' suspicions of Pakistani influence and the danger that Afghanistan could turn into a sanctuary for anti-Iranian and anti-Indian terrorist organisations. The Taliban's established relationship with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and its links to several jihadist outfits directly threatened Indian as well as Iranian

security interests. The cooperation in Afghanistan was therefore a defensive response to common threats, not an offensive partnership.²⁴

One other area of major Iranian security collaboration has been in the field of drug trafficking. Iran's role as a narcotics transit ditto with Afghanistan to the European market has raised the stakes for India in its counter-narcotics fight. Joint working groups to combat drug trafficking and intelligence sharing on trafficking routes and networks have strengthened the ability of both countries to counter this transnational crime.²⁵

Maritime security collaboration also has become a crucial aspect of India-Iran security relations, especially as the strategic value of the Indian Ocean rises. Both countries have a common interest in freedom of navigation, piracy or the militarisation of sea lanes by hostile forces. Joint naval drills, intelligence sharing pacts and cooperation in operating maritime patrols have deepened collective security work at sea.²⁶

Counter-terrorism has formed the basis of another potential area of security cooperation between India and Iran, albeit one marked by discord over what constitutes terror and articulations on regional alliances. The two countries have also been attacked by terrorists and both maintain powerful counter-terrorism facilities. Exchange of intelligence on terror networks, especially those functioning in Afghanistan and Pakistan, has been an important dimension of the security cooperation between the two countries.²⁷

India and Iran enjoy intelligence cooperation, which does not operate at an overt level but has contributed significantly to stability in the region. Both aspects have extensive intelligence networks in Afghanistan and are said to share information about activities of Pakistan, the movement of Taliban and terror threats. This is especially useful for India's security concerns in Jammu and Kashmir, as Iranian

intelligence has shared information with New Delhi on Pakistan-sponsored terrorism infiltration.²⁸

Iran Beyond the Regional Domain

Iran plays a significant role in global commerce and fossil fuel sectors, acting as a focal point for the Sino-Russian competition against Western interests while also posing a potential nuclear threat. In 2020, Iran ranked as the third-largest natural gas producer worldwide and was the fifth-largest crude oil producer within the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) by 2021. By that same year, it was recognised as holding the third-largest oil reserves and the second-largest natural gas reserves globally, boasting some of the most extensive proven reserves of both resources. As of late 2021, Iran accounted for 12% of global oil reserves and 24% of those in the Middle East.

The way global powers view Iran is crucial to contemporary international relations. From a Western perspective, Iran is increasingly seen as a threat to international security and stability, alongside being viewed as a violator of democratic principles and human rights. Tehran's nuclear program, which it claims is intended for peaceful purposes, remains a point of ongoing concern for the international community, especially among Western nations that suspect Tehran's ambitions include developing nuclear weapons. This has led to numerous severe economic sanctions against Iran, significantly impacting its population and economy. Recent protests within Iran and their violent repression, along with Iranian support for Russia during its conflict in Ukraine and regional expansionist activities, have intensified the perception of Iran as an adversary in Western circles.²⁹

Strategic Dimensions for India's Foreign Policy

The India-Iran partnership has significant ramifications for India's foreign policy outlook and its desire for regional and global leadership. Strategic stakes in Iran

call for a far more robust engagement by India. Iran's strategic importance is equally bilaterally driven as well as deriving from New Delhi's core strategic imperatives like energy security, regional influence, strategic autonomy and great powerdom.³⁰

Energy security continues to be the single most important strategic implication that India-Iran relations have for Indian foreign policy. With India likely to have the single most significant increase in global demand for energy in the next 20 years, diversification and reliability of supply are imperative for continued economic growth and national security. Iran's abundant hydrocarbon reserves, geographical proximity and existing trade ties render it a critical node in India's energy security calculus, one that can hardly be replaced.³¹

The regional connectivity aspect of India-Iran relationship has significant relevance to India's regional clout in Central Asia and its larger Indo-Pacific calculus. If the Chabahar Port could be successfully made operational and co-related connectivity infrastructure is developed, it would provide India direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asian markets, making the country less dependent on Pakistan and offering alternatives for Chinese infrastructure projects. This is an important capability for India's design to be accepted as a leading Indo-Pacific power.³²

It is this policy of strategic autonomy that the relationship with India has a massive impact on. India's ability to continue with a cooperative, cordial relationship with Iran, despite international pressure, illustrates India's quest for autonomy and resistance to external pressure. But sanctions and the imperative to balance ties with Iran against relations with the United States and other Western partners also underscore how maintaining strategic autonomy in a multipolar world is fraught with challenges.³³

The India-Iran relationship also exercises a significant impact on India's policy towards regional organisations and multilateral diplomacy. Iran's membership in fora such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, of which India too is a full member, offers an opportunity for harmony on regional questions. Iran's likely participation in other regional groups, for instance, SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) will enhance the regional mechanisms of cooperation.³⁴

Strategic dynamics of great power competition heavily impact the ramifications of India-Iran ties. It serves as a hedge against overreliance on any one great power, even as it offers India alternatives for expanding its partnerships. But escalating US-China rivalry, coupled with the demand for alignment in favour of one bloc or the other, poses a challenge to maintaining balanced relations with countries like Iran, which stand opposed to US policies.³⁵

Significance of India-Iran Bilateral Relations

On account of above mentioned dynamics, India-Iran bilateral relations have been significant for a number of reasons. First, the timing was provocative because the visit took place while the United States was amassing a large show of force in the Persian Gulf to mount military action against Iraq. India, the newfound U.S. strategic partner, vociferously objected to the U.S.-planned military action in Iraq while rolling out the red carpet to one of the founding member states of the Axis of Evil. Second, this display of amiability between Iran and India discomfited Islamabad, which still anticipates that it can count on Iran for strategic depth in the event of a conflict with India. This meeting between Pakistan's two massive neighbours, occurring at a time of heightened Indo-Pakistani tension, suggested that Islamabad's hopes may be ill-founded. Finally, the agreements signed by the two states addressed several issues, including the expansion of defence ties, cooperation in the areas of science and technology, and a broad set of engagements that both sides call "strategic" levels of cooperation. While the

timing of President Khatami's New Delhi visit and some of the resultant agreements cast an air of significance to the meeting, in many ways there is nothing particularly new about the direction and contours of the Indo-Iranian relationship. India and Iran have managed to maintain some level of détente even through the toughest moments of their histories. What then are the unique or substantially important aspects of this latest turn of the Indo-Iranian relationship? This research argues that while the current trajectory of the Indo-Iranian relationship is in many ways a continuation of past policies, it is likely to become increasingly important to both states in the near future. Many of the issues that undergird the India-Iranian relationship have been remarkably durable: e.g., security of sea lanes, integrity of energy supplies through the Persian Gulf, the relevance of India as a source of technology and low-cost development initiatives, India's desire to use Iran as a commercial corridor to markets in Central Asia, and security and stability of Afghanistan and of Pakistan. Since the terrorist attacks that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S. military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the neighbourhood in which Iran and India are situated has been fundamentally altered. As a result of the transfigured security environment, many of these issues of common interest have gained newfound salience. The relationship between India and Iran can be evaluated through a framework that identifies three distinct phases of their interactions. The first phase spans from 1947, coinciding with India's independence, to 1989, marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The second phase covers the years 1990 to 2001, characterised by the emergence of a new global order arising from the remnants of the Cold War, culminating in the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001. The third phase pertains to the current period following September 11th. Notably, because this author is a scholar of South Asian security issues and has come to study Iran as an extension of those

analytical efforts, this paper will necessarily reflect the perspective of New Delhi specifically and the vantage point of South Asia.³⁶

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Chapter-III

Connectivity and Bilateral Economic Security Issues in India-Iran Relations.

India-Iran bilateral relations is one of the most complex phenomena in contemporary world politics. Although relations between India and Iran are as old as history itself. From historical interactions to cultural trade exchange, tension seeps into the bottle as economic sanctions take their toll on a peacetime political vision. Since 1991, bilateral relations between India and Iran have evolved to encompass the broader areas connectivity and energy projects, shared strategic interests were pursued and yet, the two sides encountered with formidable challenges from international sanctions, regional security concerns and competing global alignments. India-Iran bilateral relations since the disintegration of the Soviet Union have mostly progressed on the connectivity projects, bilateral economic issues and regional security concerns. The chapter examines how both countries have tried to manage their economic relations in the context of the broader connectivity framework affecting their strategic autonomy and the economic benefits amid international pressures, domestic imperatives in relation to bilateral cooperation and regional aspirations in the context of global constraints. For India, Iran provides a vital corridor to Central Asia, Afghanistan and Europe. To Iran, India is a gateway to one of the world's largest consumer markets, technical know-how and a possible foil against Western isolation. But such a partnership has always been challenged by international sanctions regimes (mainly imposed by the United States), resulting in notable impediments to their bilateral cooperation in the achievement of desired economic benefits and smooth transaction of the exchange of goods and services.¹

The years 1990s witnessed a number of significant global and regional developments which played a key role in how India-Iran relations evolved and developed. The breakdown of the Soviet Union, New Delhi's economic opening, and Tehran's partial reorientation towards the international system opened up new

avenues for robust bilateral relations. The end of the Soviet Union created an important bridge in India-Iran links and opened up potential new spaces for direct cooperation, especially in Central Asia and Afghanistan. India's Look West policy, which began in the early 1990s, recognised Iran was a key security and economic partner in the Indian extended engagement towards westwards with Persian Gulf region and beyond². India's Look West policy was a dramatic departure from India's inward-looking economic policies and the increasing importance of building stronger ties with the energy-abundant Persian Gulf countries. The policy was a reflection of India's energy needs, its efforts at diversifying its strategic partnerships and finally, the importance that Iran holds for them as a gateway to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Several fundamental agreements and efforts were carried out during this period, setting the groundwork for positive India-Iran economic relations. India's energy needs is also rising quickly as its economy grows, making Iran an attractive partner with its huge oil and gas reserves. The deal in the year of 1995 for Iranian oil to reach India, which opened a long-term energy partnership is vital to their bilateral ties³. The 1995 accord was important not just from an economic angle, but from strategic connotations as it gave the Indian side a credible response to its large reliance on traditional energy supplies (oil and gas in this case).

The geo-strategic significance of the India-Iran bilateral economic relations began to be exposed with the emergence of joint concerns for regional security issues. In Afghanistan they had both backed the opposition, Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime for regional stability and security. The mutual interest of India and Iran in the context of Afghanistan would eventually prove to be a major factor in cooperation between the two countries, especially with regard to connectivity plans and economic partnerships. However, the imposition of the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) in 1996 imposed limitations and challenges

to their bilateral cooperation⁴. India opposed the extraterritorial application of U.S. sanctions, and such sanctions cast a cloud over Indian companies contemplating investments in Iran, adding a new complexity to bilateral economic links. The period also marked the start of India's balancing act between its ties with Iran and its burgeoning friendship with the United States and Israel. India's official initiative to Israel in 1992 and its subsequent warming up of India-U.S. relations introduced fresh dynamics that would have an enduring impact on India's Iran policy going forward⁵.

Economic relations between India and Iran

Iran is viewed as a highly resourceful nation, exhibiting greater political stability compared to several neighbouring countries following the lifting of Western sanctions. It is now recognised for possessing the largest total oil and gas reserves globally, accounting for 9.3% of the world's oil reserves and 18.2% of its gas reserves. Conversely, India's economic advancement since the introduction of its New Economic Policy and its rising significance in the international market have led to an increased interest from Iran in developing relations with the country⁶.

The economic connection between India and Iran is chiefly defined by India's acquisition of crude oil from Iran. As reported by the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, India stands as the second-largest buyer of Iranian crude oil, only behind China, with Iran being the third-largest supplier to India in terms of crude oil from April to September 2016-17. In 2012, the two nations' trade reached roughly US\$16 billion and remained over US\$15 billion until 2014. Nonetheless, total trade plummeted to US\$9.35 billion in 2015 due to interruptions in crude oil supply caused by political unrest in the Middle East. Consequently, India faces a trade deficit with Iran, as its imports of crude oil vastly exceed its exports to that nation⁷.

Map 3.1: India connected to Chabahar Port

Source:- <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/backgrounder-irans-chabahar-port/>

Connectivity Initiatives: The Chabahar Port Project and International North-South Transport Corridor

Chabahar Port (**Map 3.1**) is the flagship connectivity project in India-Iran relations, and it was a political decision with far-reaching global implications. Set in Iran's far east, the Chabahar Port is a gateway for India to create a new regional corridor, an alternative route to Afghanistan and beyond by sea that bypasses Pakistan, as well as overland trade links with Russia and Central Asia that have been blocked forever. India's interest in reconstructing Chabahar Port dates back to the late 1990s, although final negotiations started early during the first decade

of the 20th century as part of India's regional connectivity plans and alternative connectivity projects⁸. Strategically located by the Arabian Sea, less than 170 km west of Pakistan's Gwadar port, in which China has heavily invested as part of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative (**Map 3.2**). Chabahar port is essential to India's Connect Central Asia policy and Indo-Pacific strategy. The project has acquired added impetus since the announcement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and apprehensions over Chinese influence in the region through the Gwadar Port. The framework agreement for the development of Chabahar Port was formalised during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016⁹. The visit was a turning point in India-Iran relations. The pact features a roadmap for trade, allowing Afghanistan to use Chabahar port and establish road and rail links for transit into the Indian mainland.

Map 3.2: One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative

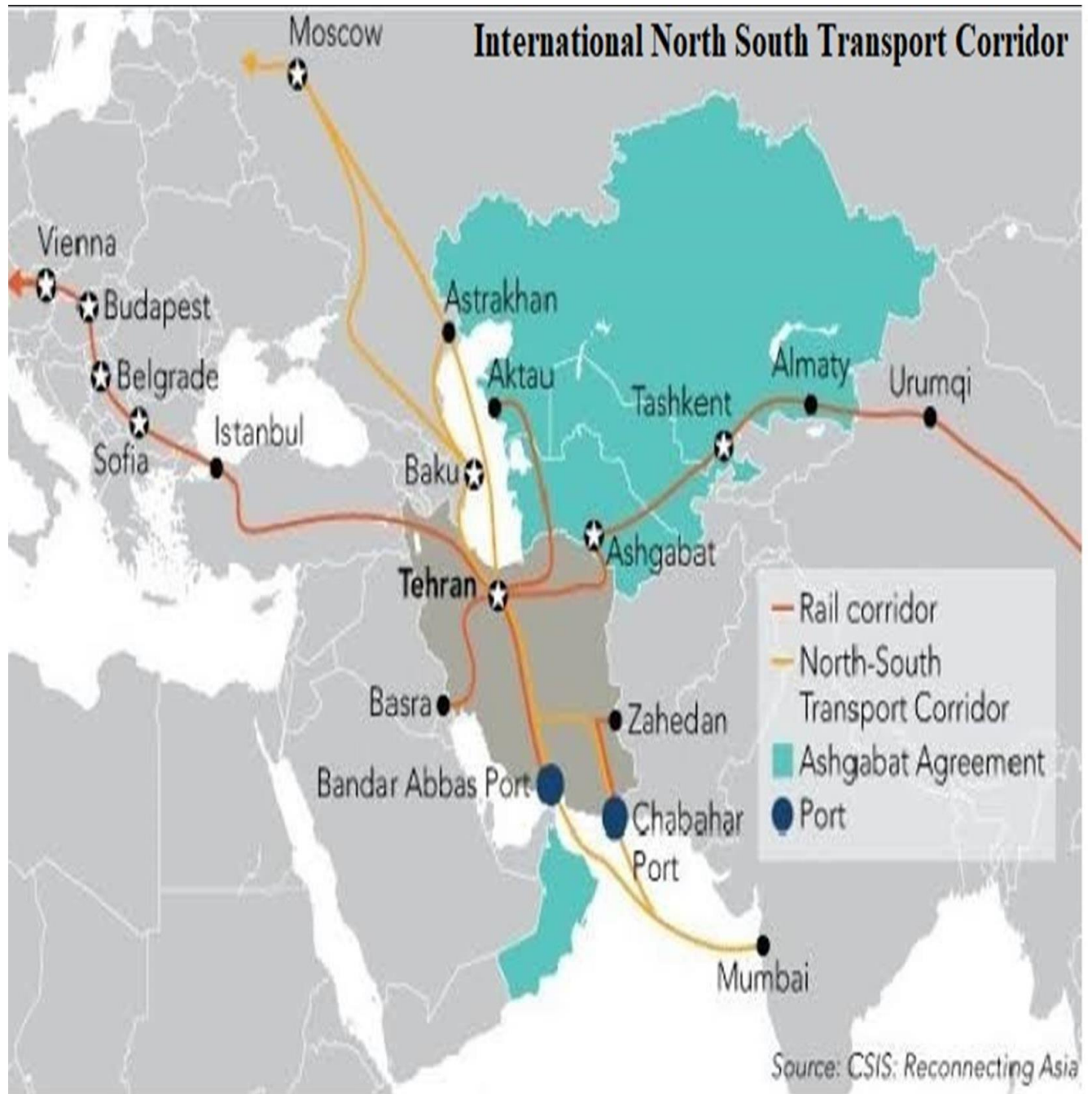


Source:- https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-showing-areas-under-one-belt-one-road-initiative_fig1_324563885

The trilateral deal with India and Afghanistan, coupled with the bilateral port deal, established the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as a connectivity platform for the future¹⁰. The INSTC had proposed a 7,200-km-long multi-modal transportation network connecting India, Iran, Afghanistan,

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia and Central Asia. The instant access corridor aimed at facilitating transit for India to Russia from 40-45 days, via Trans-Siberian Railway and the Scandinavian Railways. The INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor) is the most recent grand connectivity initiative between India and Iran (**Map 3.3**). First proposed in 2000 and substantiated through a multilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) between India, Iran, and Russia, the INSTC envisioned an integrated multimodal connection spanning over 7,200 kilometres, linking South Asia with Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe¹¹. The corridor is intended to obviate or at least reduce shipping costs and transportation times for trade between member countries, as well as offer a route that bypasses the Suez Canal. Renewed impetus was added to the INSTC when the Chabahar port agreement was signed in 2016, including the Iranian port as part of the southern leg of INSTC. Chabahar's connection to the wider INSTC network was supposed to give India easier access to Central Asia for its goods and energy exports, and Iran a new role as a regional transport hub. But the execution of the INSTC has been fraught with several obstacles, such as lack of infrastructure, regulatory hurdles and geopolitical tensions. Thus, India and Iran's cooperation has largely revolved around counterterrorism and maritime security. Both have common concerns about terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan, resulting in intelligence sharing and cooperation against terrorism¹².

Map 3.3: International North-South Transport Corridor



Source:- CSIS: Reconnecting Asis

Execution of the Chabahar Port project has been dogged with large number of issues from the beginning. India's companies and banks involved in the project were facing huge hurdles due to international sanctions specially on Iran, mainly those that have been re-imposed by the USA in 2018 after it pulled out from of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)¹³. The economic sanctions made it difficult to secure financing, acquire equipment, or enlist foreign contractors for projects, delaying them and driving up their costs. With all these constraints, India has managed to make a lot of progress in operationalising the Chabahar Port. The first phase of the port was inaugurated in December 2017, while the control and management of Shahid Beheshti Port terminal to eventually be transferred to India Ports Global Limited (IPGL)¹⁴. The port started handling commercial ships that were carrying grain shipments from India to Afghanistan, thereby proving itself as a promising trade route. Yet, volumes of trade were still significantly below the expected levels, facing a mixture of operational and geopolitical obstructions. The strategic imperatives being addressed went beyond the economic gains from Chabahar Port. For India, the port was a vital element in its calculation for establishing some form of counter-balance to Chinese power in the neighbourhood, while ensuring access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The project fit into India's strategy of emerging as a leading power in the Indo-Pacific and was a showcase that it could initiate big infrastructure projects even under the geopolitical odds.

Chabahar Port was of strategic importance to Iran, and it had viewed the project as a means to expand into its southeast regions and promote employment in those areas while also playing a key role in the regional traffic economy. The project also gave Iran a powerful non-Western ally ready to finance its infrastructure even as sanctions. The project also had wider regional geopolitical implications, especially amid great power rivalry. The construction of Chabahar Port was

largely seen as India's answer to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which had Gwadar Port as part¹⁵ (Map:3.4). The contest between Chabahar and Gwadar was symbolic of the larger India-China rivalry in the Indian Ocean region, and reflected the growing militarisation of economic cooperation in South and West Asia.

Map:3.4: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)



Source:- <https://indiandefencereview.com/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-cpec-a-review/>

Energy security cooperation has gone beyond bilateral trade to regional and third-country cooperation. They have also discussed cooperation in energy projects in Central Asia, joint development of energy infrastructure, and coordination at the international level on energy issues. Energy security goals

have served as the basis for larger cooperation and shaped the two countries' regional diplomacy¹⁶. China's involvement in regional connectivity has posed opportunities and challenges to cooperation between India and Iran. Both countries have been involved in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. However, they are also looking for less dependent alternative connectivity not based on Chinese infrastructure and funding. The rivalry between the Chabahar and the Gwadar ports has been understood with reference to this framework, with India and Iran promoting Chabahar as a counter-narrative to Chinese-led connectivity projects¹⁷. Cooperation in culture and education also provided another strategic angle to India-Iran ties. Cultural centres, student exchange programs and academic cooperation have kept the lines of communication open, thanks to these people-to-people connections, even in times of political stress. They frequently support the channels for diplomatic communication and have facilitated mutual appreciation of strategic premises¹⁸.

Chabahar Port Agreement

In 2003, India and Iran reached an agreement to implement the Chabahar project. However, progress was hindered by Western restrictions. In May 2015, India formalised a memorandum of understanding with Iran for the development of Chabahar port, a strategically significant initiative that would provide India with a maritime and overland route to Afghanistan, circumventing Pakistan. The agreement was endorsed by Nitin Gadkari, the Minister of Road Transport and Highways in India, alongside Dr. Abbas Ahmad Akhoundi, Iran's Minister for Transport and Urban Development, while also considering the international obligations stemming from Tehran's nuclear program.

India's involvement at Chabahar port, located outside the Persian Gulf and with close proximity to its western coastline, provides a maritime and overland access corridor into Afghanistan via Iran's eastern borders. The established Iranian roadway system originating from Chabahar can be utilised to connect to Zaranj

in Afghanistan, situated approximately 883 kilometres from the port. From Chabahar to Zaranj also has railway connectivity (**Map 3.5**). From Zaranj, the Delaram-Zaranj road, built by India in 2009, provides access to Afghanistan's "garland" highway, linking four major Afghan cities: Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, and Mazar-e-Sharif. A tripartite agreement between India, Iran, and Afghanistan offers preferential treatment and lower tariffs for goods passing through Chabahar port, which is also near a free trade and industrial zone. Importantly, Chabahar is more accessible for India compared to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, located approximately 380 nautical miles away. India views Chabahar not merely as an alternate route into Afghanistan but also as a gateway to the resource-rich Central Asia¹⁹.

Map 3.5: India connects to Afghanistan via Chabahar to Zaranj in Afghanistan



Source:-

<https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20240330154552.pdf>

India-Iran-Uzbekistan Trilateral Meeting

The inaugural trilateral meeting, held on December 14, 2020, among the foreign ministries of India, Iran, and Uzbekistan, concentrated on strengthening collaboration to address extremism and terrorism. One of the key objectives of this meeting was to encourage Uzbekistan's utilisation of Chabahar Port for trade with India²⁰.

Key Focus Areas encompass Connectivity and Ports, underscoring the importance of enhancing collaboration in connectivity. The meeting underscored the strategic role of ports and the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC). In terms of Trade Relations, discussions centred on initiatives aimed at strengthening trade ties and exploring additional areas of shared interest.

In addition to Uzbekistan, both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have expressed interest in utilising Chabahar port to enhance trade with India and gain access to the Indian Ocean Region. Within this framework, India's economic strategies highlighted the necessity of establishing a preliminary Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union. The goal is to penetrate Eurasian markets and procure goods, including rare earth minerals²¹.

IPI and TAPI Gas Pipeline Project

IPI (Iran-Pakistan-India) Gas Pipeline Project (Map 3.6). The IPI gas pipeline project, which aims to convey Iranian gas via Pakistan to India, was originally proposed by Iran in the mid-1990s. India withdrew from the project in 2009 due to concerns regarding U.S. sanctions and its nuclear agreement with the United States. Consequently, the pipeline evolved into the Iran-Pakistan (IP) pipeline. In February 2024, Pakistan approved the construction of the pipeline, motivated by

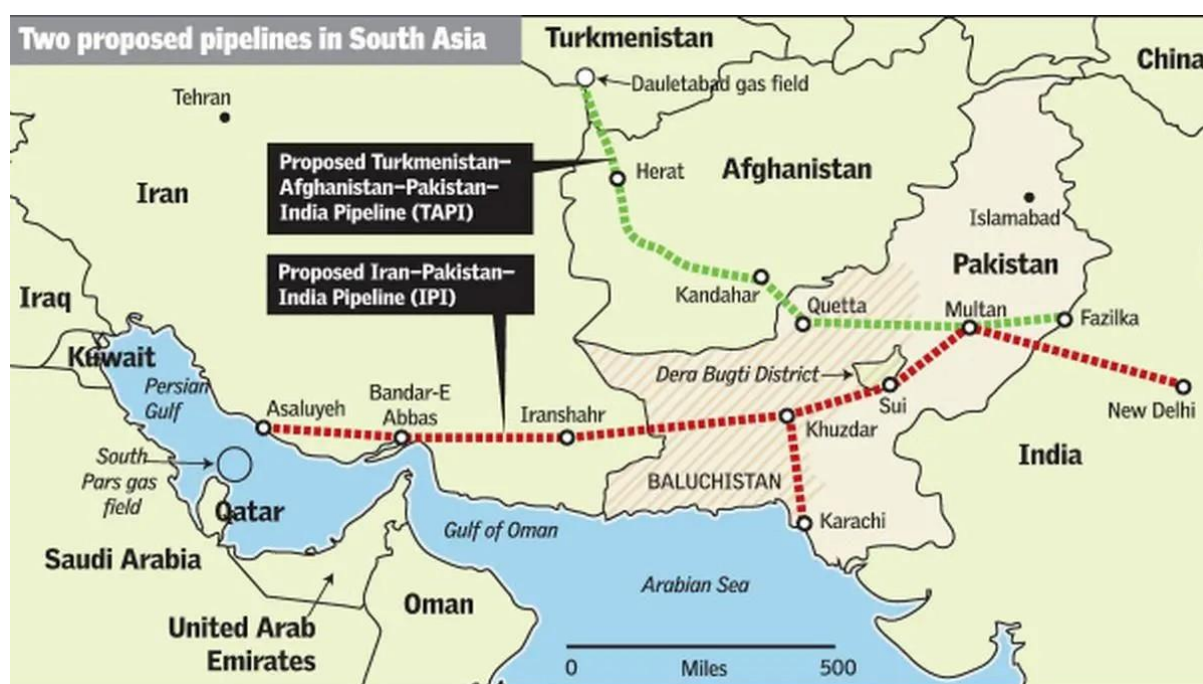
fears of incurring an \$18 billion penalty for delays, despite Iran's threats of arbitration. The U.S. has exerted pressure on Pakistan through sanctions, issuing warnings about the project in March 2024. While the Iranian segment has been completed, Pakistan has halted further progress until international sanctions against Iran are lifted.

Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Project (Map 3.6). The TAPI gas pipeline was officially initiated with a groundbreaking ceremony held in Turkmenistan on December 13, 2015. The section from Turkmenistan was finalised in 2024, and construction on the Afghan portion commenced in September 2024. However, participation from both India and Pakistan remains uncertain. In September 2024, Turkmenistan and the Taliban revived the project without the involvement of India and Pakistan. For Pakistan to benefit economically from this venture, it would need to collect \$500 million annually in transit fees. This arrangement would only be viable if India contributes between \$700 million and \$800 million each year to Pakistan.

IPI faces geopolitical sanctions and resistance from the U.S., while Pakistan navigates the challenges posed by Iranian sanctions and Western influences. TAPI encounters security issues at the intersection of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan. The conflict over IPI may also impact Pakistan's standing in relation to other international projects like TAPI. Although both pipelines promise energy security. IPI has a more developed structure but is politically stalled. Conversely, TAPI is progressing slowly but lacks comprehensive regional support. Both initiatives have the potential to significantly enhance energy security in South Asia by granting Pakistan and India access to dependable natural gas, thereby reducing reliance on expensive LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) imports. These projects are expected to generate thousands of jobs, provide substantial transit revenue for Pakistan and Afghanistan, lower consumer energy costs, and promote industrial growth

through affordable fuel options. Their success could foster diplomatic relationships, encourage economic interdependence, and establish frameworks for cross-border collaboration. TAPI may aid in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts. Whereas IPI could contribute to normalising relations among Iran, Pakistan, and India, ultimately bolstering stability in the region and enhancing prospects for lasting peace.²²

Map 3.6: IPI and TAPI Gas Pipeline Project



Source: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/the-iran-pakistan-india-gas-pipe-dream/article64103916.ece>

Energy Security Issues in India-Iran Bilateral Relations

Energy and economics have been central to the bilateral relations between the two nations. As a major participant in the hydrocarbon industry, Iran presents both prospects and challenges for India. The hydrocarbons from Iran can help meet India's increasing demand for oil and natural gas. However, India's interest in developing its energy partnership with Iran extends beyond mere commercial interactions, aligning with its goal of securing a civil nuclear agreement with the

United States. In the past, several energy agreements between the two countries were stalled due to disputes over pricing and technological issues, while others faced international scrutiny and pressure. Furthermore, global sanctions imposed on Iran have hindered India's efforts to strengthen its energy ties with the country.²³

India's Energy Needs

India is the third largest energy consumer in the world, followed by China and the United States. The tenth largest economy in the world, with a GDP of \$2.04 trillion²⁴, India accounts for 18% of the world's population. However, it only accounts for 6% of the total global energy use. The energy consumption in India has almost doubled since 2000, but it accounts for only one-third of the global average. Moreover, 300 million people in India live in energy poverty, while the remaining electrified population only have intermittent electricity access. Globally, India is anticipated to play a significant role in the expected increase in energy demand. This is primarily attributed to its expanding economy and population growth. The country's electricity sector relies predominantly on coal, which constitutes more than 70% of its energy production and represents one of the most plentiful natural resources available domestically.

Despite possessing significant coal reserves, India is becoming more reliant on imported fossil fuels²⁵. India's proven (very modest) oil reserves are around 5.7 million barrels and are primarily located in the western part of the country, namely in the state of Rajasthan and in offshore areas near Gujarat and Maharashtra. As domestic production fails to meet the demand, India was the third largest importer of crude oil in 2014. The Middle East was the main source of crude oil imports to India in 2014-2015. However, because of its refining industry, it is also a major exporter of oil products. The domestic crude oil production of India, just over 900

thousand barrels per day (kb/d) fails to meet the needs of the refinery capacity of 4.4 mb/d. But the output of the refinery industry is capable of meeting India's current consumption of oil products at 3.8 mb/d.²⁶

Iran's Energy Profile

Iran has the world's second-largest natural gas reserves and the fourth-largest proved crude oil reserves. The international sanctions have strongly impacted Iran's energy sector by limiting foreign investment and limiting technology and expertise to develop its natural resource capacity. This has resulted in cancellations and delays of upstream oil and gas projects. Regardless of the state's plentiful resources, Iran's crude oil production has substantially declined, and the growth of natural gas production has also slowed down. According to the Iranian domestic law, any foreign or private ownership of natural resources is prohibited. The state-owned National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) is responsible for all oil and natural gas projects. According to the current Iranian oil contract model, International Oil Companies (IOCs) can join only the exploration and development phases through buyback contracts. But Iran is planning to change the contract and allow IOCs to participate in all phases of an upstream project. Iran has 10% of the world's crude oil reserves, of which 70% are located onshore, and the remaining are in the offshore Persian Gulf. Due to the sanctions imposed by the United States and European Union, the exports of Iran dropped from 2.6 million b/d in 2011 to approximately 1.4 million b/d in 2014. India, China, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey are the largest buyers of Iranian crude oil and condensate²⁷. It is also critical to note that after the sanctions against Iran were lifted in January 2016, India's oil imports from Iran increased by approximately 21 per cent in the month of February alone and were 50 per cent more than the same month last year. India was pressured by the West to cut imports from Iran in February 2015 due to the sanctions.

Iran's significance for India primarily lies in its geographic location and a major source of crude oil and natural gas. Iran controls the entry and exit to the Strait of Hormuz through which large quantities of crude oil pass. Furthermore, Iran also provides an alternative route to India for trade and commerce with the Central Asian countries. Due to India's geopolitical position in the subcontinent and tensions with Pakistan and China, connectivity to Central Asia via Iran has been a critical part of its foreign policy for a number of years. The development of Chabahar port, the International North South Trade Corridor (INSTC) and the connection with the Zarani-Delagram road in Afghanistan are important for both India and Iran. However, while none of these projects have taken off, there are positive bilateral and diplomatic talks pushing these projects. Iran wanted India to invest in building the infrastructure for connectivity in the region, but the Indian companies were hesitant due to the problems arising from the international sanctions²⁸. However, this has changed due to the lifting of the sanctions against Iran.

The deepening of India-Iran economic relations occurred in the first 10 years of the 21st century, mostly because India sought to initiate its energy demand and Iran pursued diversification of energy routes. The most substantial development in this phase was the conclusion of negotiations over the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline, also known as the "Peace Pipeline." Initially developed in the 1990s and eventually signed into law in 2005, the infrastructure project involved building a 2,775-kilometre pipeline to transport natural gas from Iran's South Pars field across Pakistan and to India²⁹. It was expected to cost about \$7.4 billion and provide India with 60 million cubic metres of gas a day for 25 years. The IPI pipeline was not only a major energy cooperation initiative, but it could also be a confidence-building measure between two conflict-stricken and distrustful

neighbours (**Map 3.6**). Due to various obstacles surrounding the IPI pipeline encountered India's interest was piqued, and India finally pulled out of the project in 2009. Again, pricing squabbles, security for the pipeline traversing Pakistan and international sanctions against Iran were among the sticking points. India's mistrust regarding the security of energy transportation across Pakistan was derived from the history of strained bilateral relations and the fear that political conflicts could cripple energy flows. The other reason was that the pricing formula set by Iran was uncompetitive against swift and flexible sources of energy such as liquefied natural gas (LNG) from other suppliers. India's pull-out from the IPI pipeline project represented a major blow to India-Iran energy synergy and brought into sharp relief the intricate web of trade relations, security calculus and geopolitical considerations in their bilateral relations³⁰.

This energy collaboration had been of vital importance for India's economic development when the country was undergoing the process of industrialisation and urbanisation at an accelerated pace. The economic dynamics of India-Iran trade during these years also became remarkably complicated, especially following international sanctions. The adoption of the UNSC Resolution 1737 in 2006 proved to be a major hurdle for bilateral financial transactions³¹. Indian and Iranian banks found alternatives and creative solutions to work around the sanctions, such as barter deals, rupee-based accounts and third-country bank transfers. The RBI and the Iranian central bank, then known as Bank Markazi, have been working closely to develop alternative payment mechanisms that are compliant with sanctions, which maintain bilateral trade. It was during this period that the concept of the Asian Clearing Union (ACU) mechanism was also gaining recognition. ACU was set up in 1974 to promote monetary cooperation among Asian countries and offered a multilateral clearing system, which enabled payments required for bilateral trade³². India and Iran were still able to settle trade

payments even though direct banking channels were rickety due to the sanctions. However, ACU was not without constraints in the volumes that were permitted and the nature of the transactions which could be undertaken, which requires each country to develop more instruments.

Economic relations between India and Iran are based on trade diversification during this period. Energy needs and security have continued to dominate bilateral trade between India and Iran in the form of diversification into other areas. From India's side, exports to Iran comprised pharmaceuticals, chemicals, textiles as well as machinery items and certain food products³³. During this period, imports from Iran included petrochemicals, dried fruits, carpets and handicrafts. The bilateral trade turnover increased from around \$2 billion in 2000 to more than \$13- billion by 2008, which indicates the deepening of economic relations despite external limitations. This period also saw the rise of joint ventures and investment alliances. Indian companies, especially in the pharma and petrochemical industries, started setting up shop there to tap into not only its huge domestic market, but also as a gateway to Central Asia. Conversely, Iranian firms were also seeking business prospects in the rapidly growing Indian market, their financial commitments, however, paled when compared to foreign investment from elsewhere³⁴.

Bilateral Trade and Trade Mechanism

The development of India-Iran trade ties provides an instructive chronicle of the complex interplay between economic possibilities on one hand, and political limitations and external pressures on the other. Despite incredible obstacles to trade, both countries have found ways to innovate and have created systems reaching beyond borders under strained conditions. The nature of two-way trade has changed little over this period, with energy products accounting for the

majority of Iranian exports to India and manufactured goods, pharmaceuticals and agri-products representing Indian exports. Nevertheless, the absolute and relative weight of trade has varied strongly with sanction regimes, political changes or the structure of the international economy³⁵. Total trade during the period of their peak value in the year 2007–12, which stood at USD 15 billion annually, made Iran India's No.10 trading partner. Indian imports from Iran were largely derived from crude oil that constituted, on average, 85–90 per cent of total imports with petrochemicals, fertilisers and dry fruits items³⁶. The heavy reliance on imported energy thereby rendered the trade relationship extremely susceptible to sanctions and political shifts. Indian exports to Iran were more diversified, mirroring the comparative and competitive advantages of India in different manufacturing and services. Pharmaceuticals gained a prominent share of India's exports, followed by engineering goods. Indian pharmaceutical companies not only tapped the preferences for low cost and competitive technology, but also managed to capture sizeable market segments in Iran³⁷. This trade was favoured by the Iranian market size, the need for low-priced medicines and the similarity between Indian products and Iran's regulations.

The introduction of new payment mechanisms was essential to keep trade under sanctions. The most important was the opening of rupee accounts for Iranian entities in Indian banks. Through this route, Iranian oil suppliers could take cotton and some other produce, like silver, which would pay for Indian goods³⁸. Although the system had its drawbacks, such as foreign exchange convertibility barriers and limited transaction volume, it allowed significant bilateral trade to be conducted during the scenario of international embargos.

Another significant conduit for bilateral payments was the Asian Clearing Union (ACU) mechanism. Iran was a member of ACU, along with India and several Asian countries, which enabled collective clearing of payments in a basket of Asian currencies³⁹. This was especially handy for smaller-scale transactions, and

it also helped protect from international banking limitations. But the ACU was constrained in transaction volume, and additional bilateral commitments were needed for big trade. There has been big business under the barter trade and sale of Indian oil only during critical sanctions. All these were barter arrangements with goods exchanged directly without any money flows, and they were not implicated in the transactions of the international monetary system. For instance, India exported wheat, rice and medicines to Iran for crude oil, fertilisers among others⁴⁰. Bartering was hugely inefficient compared with using a currency, but it presented a sanctions-resistant opportunity to keep trading alive. Building bilateral investment links was more difficult than trade, because of sanctions restrictions and the long-term nature of investments. But numerous Indian firms had businesses in Iran, especially in the pharmaceuticals, automobiles and telecommunications sectors. These investments were frequently organised as joint ventures with Iranian counterparts and oriented toward the domestic Iranian market, rather than export-oriented production⁴¹. Iranian investments in India were not substantial at any point, to some extent due to the fragile state of Iran's own economy and the intricate nature of sanctions writ large. Yet some significant steps included Iranian involvement in Indian energy projects as well as the setting up of cultural and educational centres. The Iranian government also availed itself of the opportunity to invest in Indian infrastructure projects, including those involving connectivity and energy transport.

Trade in services between India and Iran evolved "slowly" with Indian entities providing engineering, construction and IT services to Iranian clients. This trade in services is known as the exchange of goods, but it was a significant aspect of economic cooperation. Indian engineering companies were also involved in several Iranian infrastructure projects, whereas Indian IT firms supplied software development and technical assistance⁴². Role of small and medium-sized

enterprises (SMEs) in bilateral trade as large corporations operated under increasingly tight sanctions constraints. In both cases, SMEs established some unofficial networks and relationships that allowed trade in specific products in marginal sectors.

Nature of India-Iran bilateral trade

India and Iran share a long history of socio-cultural and trade connections that date back to ancient times. As significant economies in contemporary global contexts, Iran is situated in the Gulf region, while India is located in South Asia. The two nations maintain strong political and economic ties. Similar to many other developing countries, both have sought advantages from industrialised nations. Nonetheless, following the Islamic Revolution, Iran has enhanced its trade relationships with developing economies due to sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western nations. In the years immediately after the revolution, bilateral trade between India and Iran saw considerable growth as Iran aimed to foster trade with India and other developing countries to lessen its reliance on Western countries and address shortages resulting from sanctions during the hostage crisis.

In 1983, India and Iran established a joint commission aimed at bolstering their trade relations. During meetings of this commission, all matters about bilateral trade are deliberated upon. The 18th session of the Joint Commission Meeting (JCM) took place in Delhi on December 28, 2015, where both parties expressed satisfaction regarding the expanding interactions across various sectors.

Despite various diplomatic, political, economic, and technical advancements, as well as efforts by both nations to enhance their bilateral relationship, a stable and enduring strategic partnership has not been achieved. India, influenced by international pressures, opposed Iran twice during votes in the International

Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Board of Governors in September 2005 and February 2006. In reaction to these actions, Iran cautioned that it might reassess its economic ties with India (BBC, 2005). Additionally, discussions regarding the transit project for Iranian liquefied natural gas (LNG) to India via Pakistan, known as "the Peace Pipeline," remained unresolved. In Afghanistan, India's willingness to collaborate with Iran diminished as it aligned more closely with the United States' interests. Although, India and Iran maintained cooperation in trade and economic sectors, the nuclear dispute alongside escalating tensions between Iran and Western countries hindered the potential for a strategic alliance.

Over the past ten years, trade relations between India and Iran have experienced substantial growth; specifically, India's total trade (exports plus imports) with Iran surged from \$1.7 billion in 2005 to \$15.7 billion in 2014—a more than nine-fold increase. In 2014 alone, Iran ranked as India's twenty-fourth largest export destination, representing 1.4 per cent of India's overall exports. Moreover, it was the fifteenth largest supplier of imports for India, contributing to 2.4 per cent of India's total imports globally. However, the economic sanctions placed on Iran have negatively impacted bilateral trade due to a gradual decline in available international banking channels.

India exports a variety of goods to Iran, including rice, machinery and instruments, metals, both primary and semi-finished iron and steel, pharmaceuticals, fine chemicals, processed minerals, synthetic yarns and fabrics, tea, agrochemicals (both organic and inorganic), and rubber products. The bulk of India's imports from Iran is crude oil, which constitutes 85.9 per cent of the total imports from the country. In 2014, India ranked as the second-largest importer of Iranian crude oil. Conversely, during that same year, Iran was India's sixth-largest source for crude oil. However, due to sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western nations that disrupted payment mechanisms and shipping routes, India has progressively reduced its imports from Iran. Following

the US's blockage of payment channels linked to Iran's nuclear activities in February 2013, India has been settling approximately 45 per cent of its oil payments in rupees through an arrangement with Uco Bank.

From April 1996 to March 2015, Indian foreign direct investment (FDI) approved for joint ventures and wholly owned subsidiaries in Iran totalled US\$183.4 million. Various Indian firms such as ESSAR, OVL, Tata Steel, and Persia Rohit Mines & Industries Company, have established operations in Iran. The State Bank of India (SBI) maintains a representative office in Tehran. During the same period (April 2000 to March 2015), India's FDI inflows from Iran were recorded at US\$0.6 million. Notable joint ventures between the two nations include the Irano-Hind Shipping Company and Madras Fertiliser Company as well as Chennai Refinery. Both countries have formalised a Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA) and are nearing completion on a Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA).

India and Iran are currently engaged in discussions regarding several collaborative projects, such as the IPI gas pipeline initiative, an annual supply agreement for 5 million tons of LNG, exploration of oil and gas blocks in Farsi, Development initiatives at the South Pars gas field, the construction of the Chahbahar container terminal, and the Chahbahar-Zaranj railway project are notable examples. Furthermore, both countries have created collaborative enterprises such as Madras Fertiliser Company and Chennai Refinery⁴³.

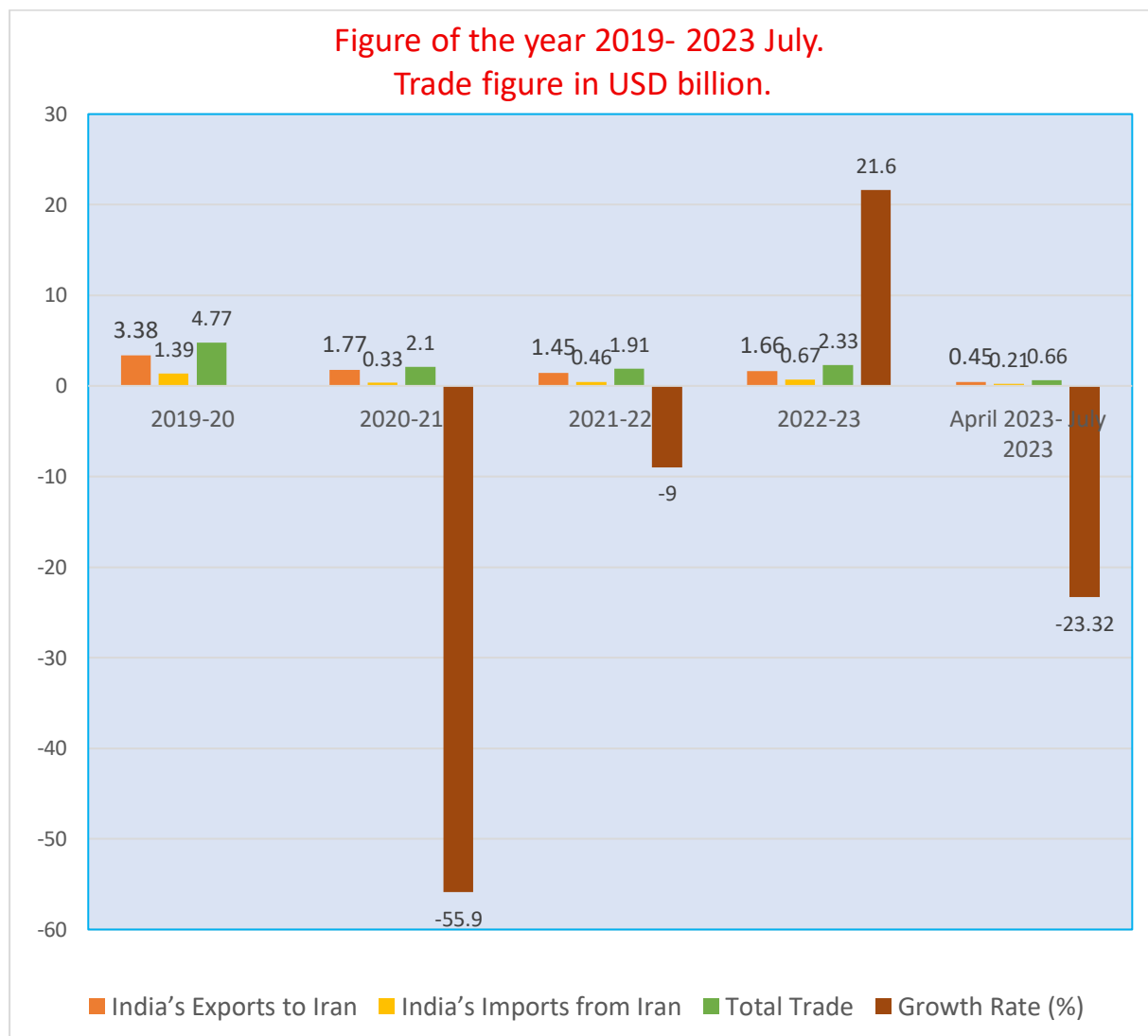
Bilateral Trade volume from the year 2019-2023

India and Iran's bilateral trade for the fiscal year 2022-23 reached \$2.33 billion, reflecting a year-over-year increase of 21.76%. During this timeframe, India's exports to Iran totalled \$1.66 billion, marking a growth of 14.34% from the previous year, while imports from Iran were valued at \$672.12 million, which represented a significant rise of 45.05% year-on-year.

For the current fiscal year, covering April 2023 to July 2023, bilateral trade amounted to USD 660.70 million. Within this period, Indian exports reached USD 455.64 million and imports stood at USD 205.14 million. Overall trade during this time saw a decline of 23.32% compared to the same period last year⁴⁴.

(Chart- 3.1)

Chart- 3.1: India-Iran Bilateral trade decreased, 2019-2023



Source: Department of Commerce, Govt. of India

Bilateral trade agreement between India and Iran

The Trade Agreement between the Government of India and the Imperial Government of Iran was signed on May 2, 1961. This agreement reiterates the provisions outlined in the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation established between the two governments on December 15, 1954, aimed at further enhancing and fostering commercial ties between India and Iran.

Under this agreement, various commodities are designated for export from India to Iran, encompassing several sectors:

- **Textiles:** This includes cotton, woollen fabrics, silk, and rayon.
- **Food Manufacturing:** Items such as tea, coffee, various spices including pepper, provisions like cashew kernels, confectionery products, sugar, as well as cane jaggery and its powder (Indian gur), alongside fresh and preserved fruits which may be bottled or canned.
- **Agriculture:** Products include hydrogenated oils (Vanaspati or vegetable ghee), vegetable oils and oilseeds, essential oils, along with raw tobacco.
- **Chemical Products:** The scope covers chemicals including pharmaceuticals, drugs and medicines; sera and vaccines; toiletries and perfumery items; paints, pigments and varnishes; soaps (both household and toilet); naphthalene.
- **Engineering:** This sector includes diesel engines, pumps powered by diesel engines or electric motors, sewing machines, bicycles along with their parts, metal containers, safety razor blades; textile machinery such as carding machines and weaving looms; machine tools both hand-operated and small-sized, sugarcane crushing equipment, paddy dehusking machinery, flour processing machinery, printing equipment; small river vessels, ball-bearings; gliders, agricultural tools, automobile components, structural materials.
- **Electrical Sector:** Items encompass electrical fans along with their parts; batteries (both dry and wet); a range of electrical appliances including conduit pipes, switches, bells, holders, cut-outs etc, electric bulbs and tubes, generators; radio receivers, electric torches, electric motors, ebonite sheets, rods, tubes, cables, wires, transmission towers.

- **Household Items:** This includes cement, copper & brass sheets, frames for windows, doors & others, G.I. pipes & fittings, household electrical fixtures, utensils made from stainless steelware, cooking ranges & heaters, electric irons, toasters, kettles etc., roofing tiles, linoleum, sanitary ware, manhole covers & plates, hurricane lanterns, kerosene stoves, incandescent oil pressure lamps, safes, strong boxes & roof fittings as well as crockery.

In the manufacturing sector, the scope includes products like tyres and tubes, tyre retreading compounds, foam rubber, various leather goods, artificial leather products, as well as handicrafts and items produced by cottage industries.

Per the agreement, the following items were imported from Iran to India, dry fruits such as almonds, pistachios, walnuts, hazelnuts, fresh and dried dates, various types of raisins and currants; dried fruits including apricots, peaches, and figs, fresh fruits, quince seeds, roots and stems used for dyeing and tanning; plants and herbs for medicinal, perfumery, or industrial applications, asafoetida, gum tragacanth along with other gums, cumin seeds (both black and green), carpets and rugs; wool, red oxide, sulphur, mineral ores like copper, zinc, and lead, cotton, raw hides and skins, fish along with its products, turquoise and pearls (not bored), handicrafts, Persian films, books, magazines, and newspapers; salted or unsalted sheep and goat guts, as well as patented medicines.

The two nations formalised their commitment to potential collaboration with the signing of the “Tehran Declaration” in April 2001. This was followed by the endorsement of “The New Delhi Declaration” in 2003, which articulated a vision for a strategic partnership between India and Iran. In December 2015, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was established to enhance cooperation across various sectors, including trade, finance, energy, infrastructure, and cultural matters. During Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi's recent visit

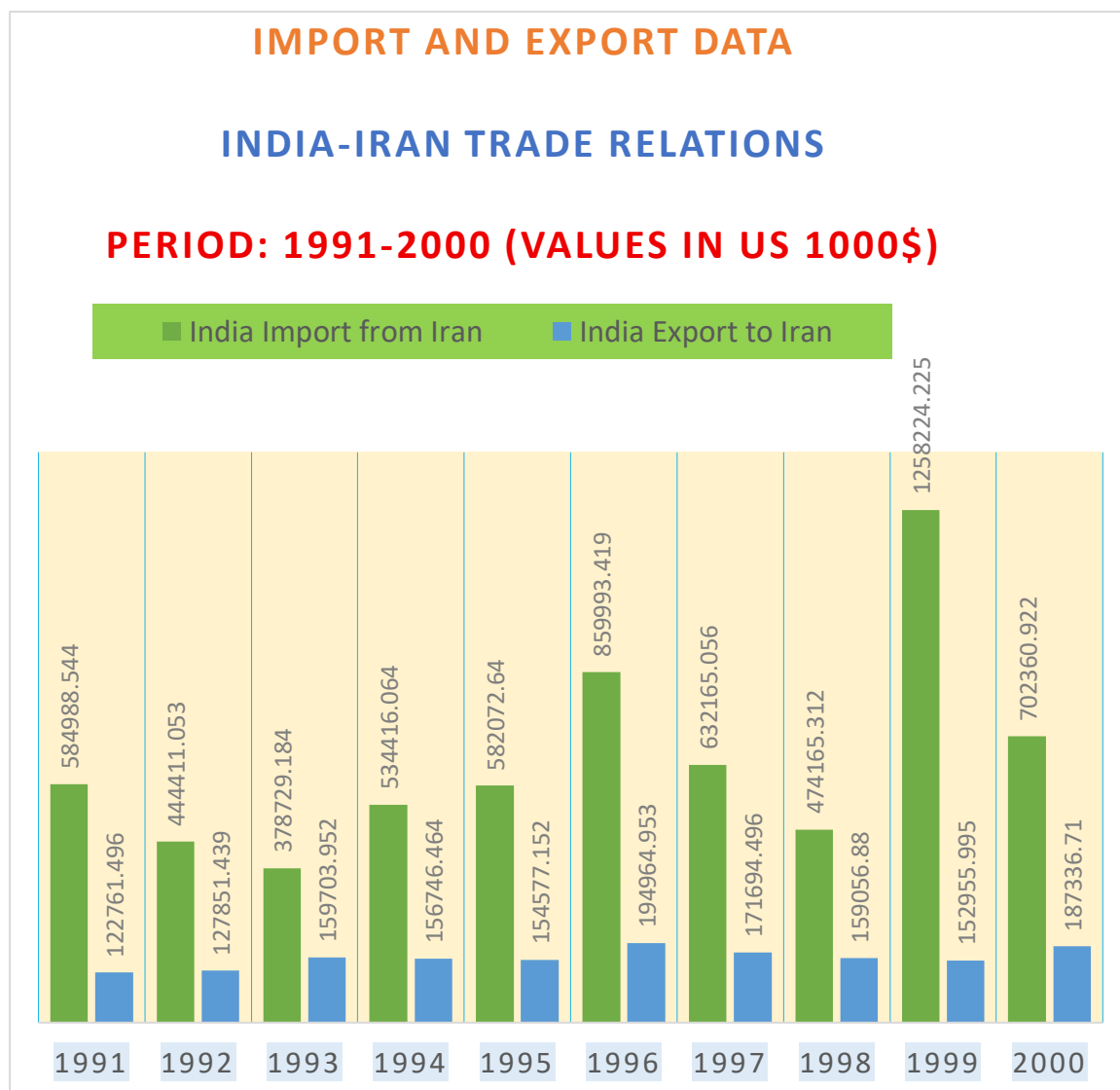
to Iran, a total of 12 agreements/MoUs were finalised. Notably, the Trilateral Transit Agreement (Chabahar Agreement) was signed in May 2016 by the transport ministers of India, Iran, and Afghanistan in the presence of Prime Minister Modi, President Rouhani, and President Ashraf Ghani⁴⁵.

The analysis indicates that the trade volume between India and Iran has seen a consistent increase over the years. The demand for oil in India has surged, primarily due to its swift economic growth. In light of Iran's nuclear program and the protectionist approach adopted by the Trump administration, India and Iran must seek opportunities to strengthen their bilateral relations. India can serve as a stable market for Iranian oil, which can be supplied at competitive prices. However, due to the existing trade deficit, India should aim to diversify its export portfolio, focusing on goods where it holds a comparative advantage to reduce this deficit. Additionally, it would be beneficial for India to broaden its sources of oil imports. Consequently, considering the current economic landscape, enhancing bilateral trade between these two nations is crucial and presents mutually advantageous prospects for both countries⁴⁶.

In response to consistent economic growth, the Indian government has identified energy security as a significant aspect of its foreign policy, essential for sustaining the socio-economic advancement vital to India's position within the global framework. With the lifting of international sanctions, Iran has re-established itself in the oil market, offering India a dependable and geopolitically advantageous energy partnership. Additionally, Iran is eager to recover its market share lost during sanctions, and India represents a valuable opportunity for this objective. The evolution of Indo-Iranian relations has been influenced by India's energy requirements, Iran's ambitions regarding market presence, connectivity to

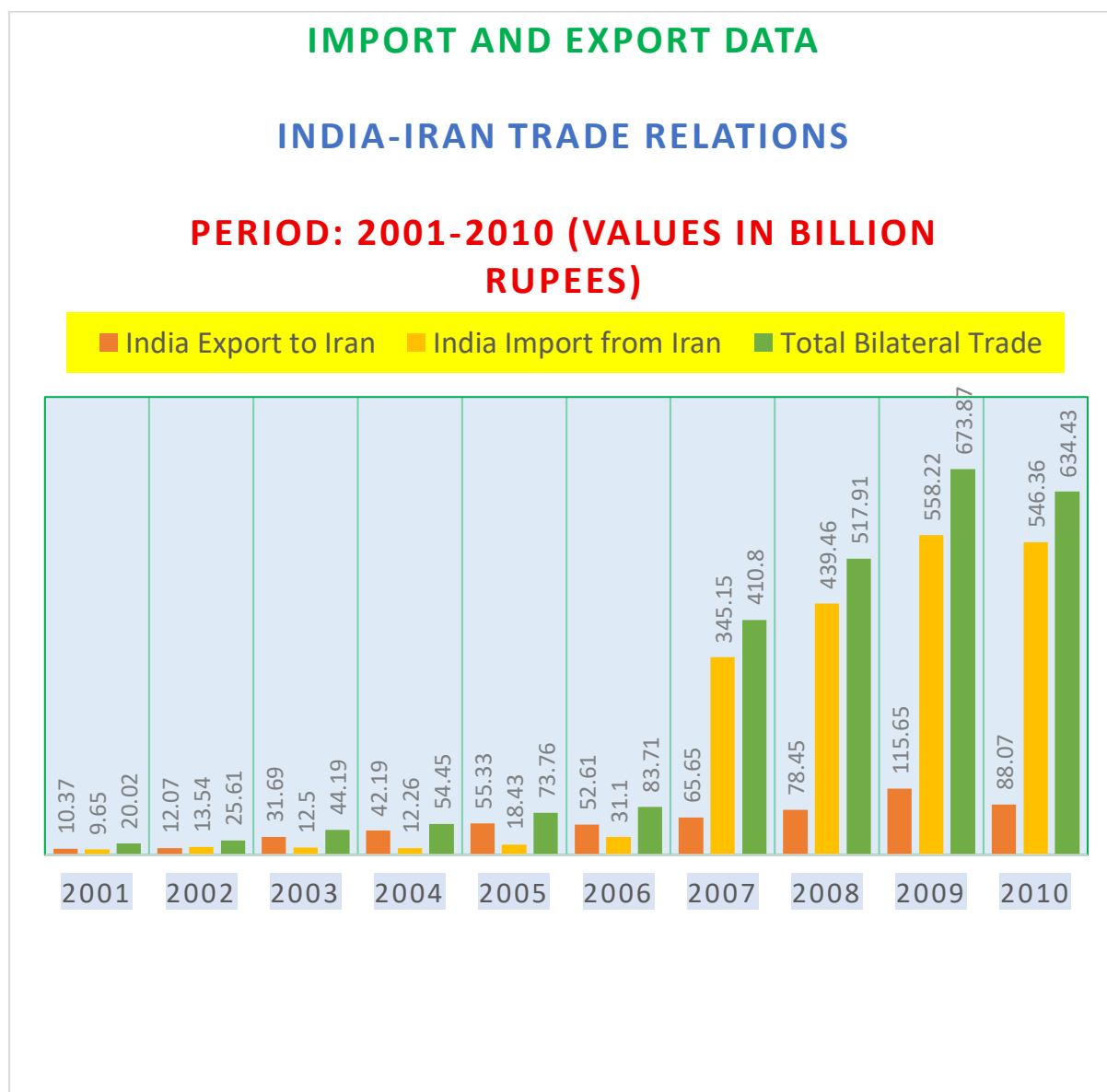
Central Asia, and various regional dynamics. India is actively working on strengthening its energy ties with Iran. For instance, ahead of Prime Minister Modi's visit to Iran, the central banks of both nations reached an agreement allowing European banks to facilitate \$6.4 billion in overdue oil payments owed to Tehran. For India, Iran remains crucial from geopolitical, strategic, economic, and security perspectives. Nonetheless, India needs to cultivate distinct bilateral relationships with both Saudi Arabia and Iran since they are major oil suppliers but also regional rivals⁴⁷.

Chart- 3.2: India-Iran Bilateral trade 1991 to 2000



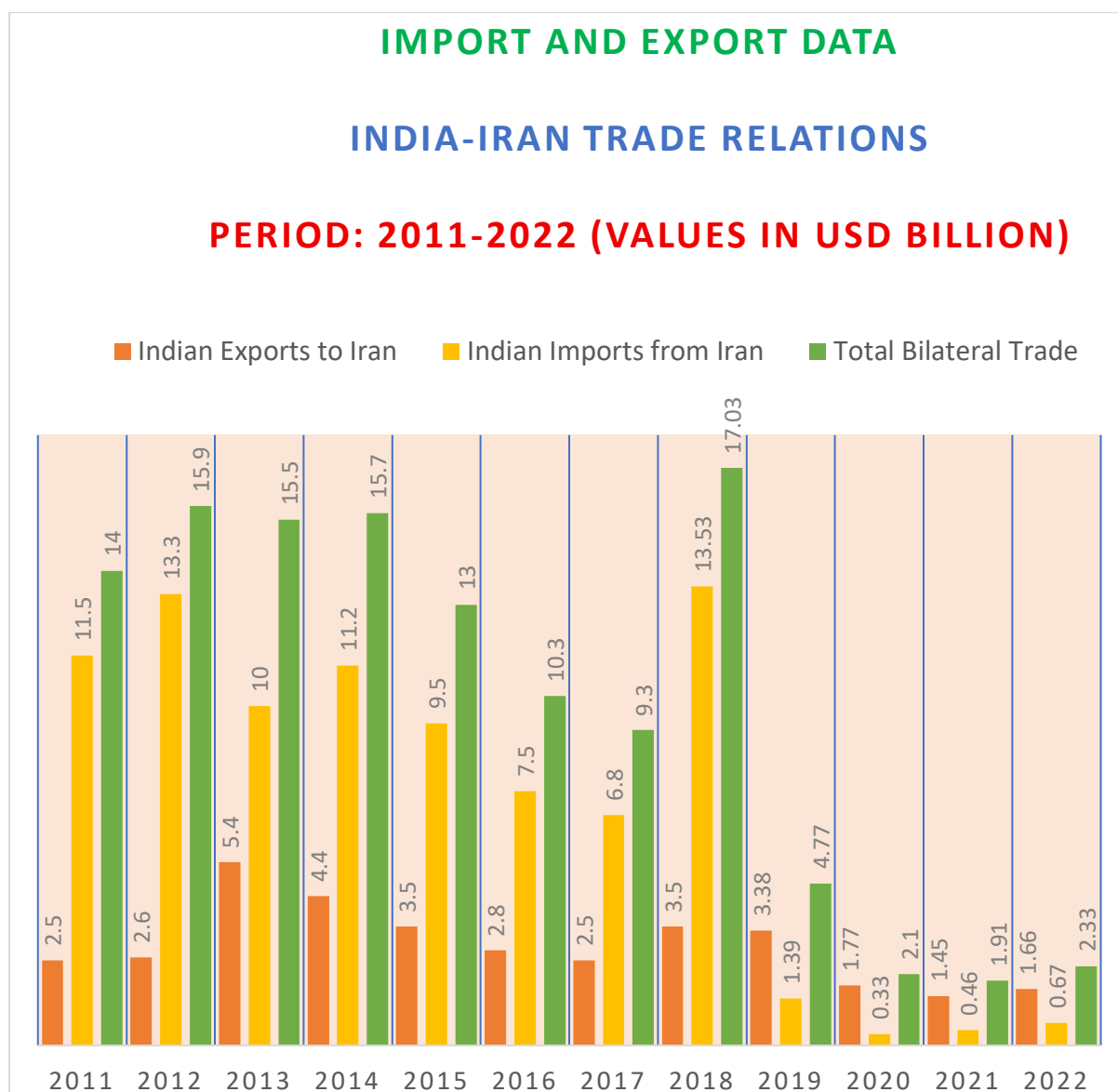
Source:- World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)

Chart- 3.3: India-Iran Bilateral trade 2001 to 2010



Source- Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Govt. of India

Chart- 3.4: India-Iran Bilateral trade 2011 to 2022



Source- Department of Commerce, Govt. of India.

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Chapter-IV

Soft Power Diplomacy in India-Iran Bilateral Relations.

The Historical and cultural context

India and Iran are two of the oldest nations in Asia, each with their own unique cultural identity. The bilateral relations between India and Iran have yielded remarkable outcomes, particularly within the spheres of art and culture. A historical overview reveals that these two cultures have maintained strong ties since the era of pre-Aryan and pre-Islamic Persia, extending through the Vedic period and into the Islamic influences of the Mughal and Safavid dynasties. Both India and Iran share a rich civilizational heritage, characterised by interconnected cultural legacies and common challenges in safeguarding them. Throughout history, India and Iran have fostered profound relationships across various domains. The influence each nation has had on the other is evident in their literary traditions, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and architectural styles from ancient times to the present day¹. In this chapter, the focus will be on the historical and contemporary cultural and civilizational connections between India and Iran. It will explore how both nations have utilised soft power strategies to enhance their bilateral relations. The discussion will also examine the extent to which India and Iran have upheld their cultural diplomacy in the face of external challenges and restrictions².

Cultural and civilisational ties have been the cornerstone of India-Iran bilateral relations throughout this time. The Persian language had for centuries been the court language of Mughal India and formed deep spiritual, cultural, linguistic and literary ties³. Indian popular culture, music and art forms have been heavily influenced by Persian culture owing to the close contact that India has had with Persia throughout history. It is these cultural connections that have given the relationship a degree of resilience, enabling it to survive many political storms⁴.

The archaeological findings in Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, and the northwestern regions of Punjab and Estasorahtra reveal a significant historical heritage dating back to 2500 BC. The earliest Indian scriptures are the Vedas, which are believed to have originated around 1500 BC. These texts exhibit notable similarities with the Avesta, the ancient scripture of Iran. Both countries share linguistic features as well as structural characteristics. Sanskrit and Avesta are closely related languages, especially regarding their terminology and phonetic elements. The composition styles of poetry in these languages resemble each other to such an extent that one can apply phonetic rules to translate Avesta into Vedic forms.

The deities and myths present in the Rigveda and Avesta show striking parallels, reflecting shared practices such as solar worship and reverence for fire among both Indians and Iranians. The ancient religion of Zoroastrianism exhibits many commonalities with early Vedic traditions, including fire worship and a dualistic portrayal of Devas (gods) and Asuras (demons), suggesting a historical connection between these belief systems. During the peak of the Mauryan Dynasty around 260 BC, parts of Eastern Iran were integrated into Indian territory⁵.

Components of India's soft power diplomacy

Soft power has become an essential element of foreign policy in the post-Cold War landscape, and India leverages its extensive cultural and historical legacy to implement it.

The foundation of India's soft power is deeply entrenched in its history. For centuries, its civil society has provided religious tolerance to various

communities, including Jews, Parsees, Christians, and Muslims. A key concept that underpins this approach is the value placed on family, the significant Sanskrit expression "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," which was mentioned by Modi himself, meaning that the world is one family⁶.

Film

The Indian film industry, primarily represented by Bollywood, has captivated audiences worldwide. Bollywood maintains a close relationship with the Indian Foreign Ministry, contributing to the development of foreign policy and striving to enhance India's reputation internationally through the export of cultural products. Even those unfamiliar with India are likely aware of the Three Khans. Following the Kargil War in 1999, India and Pakistan collaborated on multiple films to foster peace and reconciliation between the two nations⁷.

Sports

Cricket has emerged as a significant tool of soft power for India. The concept of "cricket diplomacy" has notably contributed to alleviating tensions between India and Pakistan. It has also served as an indication of a willingness to engage in negotiations. For instance, in 1987, the relationship between the two nations had deteriorated significantly. To ease the strain, General Zia-ul-Haq, the President of Pakistan, travelled to India to attend a cricket match between the two countries.

In 2008, relations took a severe hit when an Islamist terrorist organisation from Pakistan executed coordinated attacks in Mumbai, greatly straining bilateral ties. However, three years later, the Prime Ministers of both nations convened in Mohali, India, to watch the semi-finals of the Cricket World Cup. This meeting

was followed by high-level diplomatic discussions that helped alleviate some of the ongoing tensions between them⁸.

Religion, culture, and spiritualism

Yoga, often referred to as 'India's gift to the world,' serves as a significant tool of soft power for India, with millions of dedicated practitioners across the globe. In 2014, Prime Minister Modi successfully advocated for the United Nations to designate June 21 as World Yoga Day. This practice acts as an effective means of promoting the Indian lifestyle and helps to project India's image as a peaceful nation that avoids aggression. Within the realm of foreign policy, leveraging the comprehensive benefits of yoga aids in fostering goodwill among other nations.

Buddhism, which originated in ancient India, has since expanded to China, Southeast Asia, and further afield. Modi employs Buddhist diplomacy as a strategy to fulfil both his strategic and economic foreign policy objectives. Among these objectives are countering Chinese soft power and enhancing religious tourism within India⁹.

The Indian diaspora

The Indian diaspora serves as a significant component of India's soft power diplomacy. In the United States, it plays a crucial role in enhancing Indo-US relations through advocacy efforts directed at American lawmakers. It helps cultivate a favourable perception of India among the American populace.

The field of Information Technology has contributed to India's soft power. When professionals in Silicon Valley regard the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) with the same esteem traditionally reserved for MIT, and when the association of Indian engineers and software developers with mathematical and scientific proficiency becomes widely recognised, it is India that reaps the benefits of this increased respect¹⁰.

The nature of soft power diplomacy between India and Iran

The idea of soft power, as described by Joseph Nye, is the ability to attract and co-opt rather than use coercion, including culture, political values and foreign policies¹¹. In the case of India–Iran relations, soft power has been an essential tool of bilateral connection over three decades of momentous changes in the geopolitical environment. India and Iran enjoy civilizational ties and have shared views on issues of common interest for thousands of years. There are significant memories of cultural exchanges, trade links and influence in the fields of art, literature and philosophy¹². This historical base has become a sturdy platform for today's mutual diplomatic efforts, even as both countries have negotiated intricate world situations¹³.

Historically, the roots of Indian soft power can be traced back to the philosophical concepts of ahimsa, the pacifism of the Buddhist Emperor Asoka, the universalism of Hinduism and the non-violent independence struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. From classical dance and music, old traditions of yoga and Ayurveda, to cuisine, fashion, and Bollywood movies, Indian culture is a great source of the country's power of attraction. The Indian diaspora, over 20 million strong and spread across the globe, is a powerful asset for disseminating a positive image of the country. The nation, known for its extensive international

community, is also respected for its emphasis on education, political diversity, and religious tolerance¹⁴.

Iran and India, both nations with deep-rooted and historical cultures, have enjoyed a long-standing and amicable relationship throughout their histories. They possess numerous shared traits across various domains such as language, art, culture, traditions, customs, and moral values. These similarities have facilitated the strengthening and expansion of their bilateral ties. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister after gaining independence, noted in his book "The Discovery of India" that among the many peoples who have influenced India's cultural landscape, the Iranians stand out as the earliest and most enduring. The longstanding connections between Persians and Indians predate even the arrival of the Aryans on the Iranian Plateau. Archaeological discoveries in both countries reveal a significant relationship between Indian and Iranian civilisations dating back to ancient times. Artefacts unearthed from Sialk Hill in Kashan during excavations in 1930 suggest that this historic city served as a vital intersection for both cultures. Furthermore, with the emergence of Islam and its spread across the Indian subcontinent, the cultural ties between Iran and India were further reinforced¹⁵.

Looking at the persistent and successful spaces for soft power and cultural diplomacy engagement of India with Iran, it has perhaps been the most successful in relation to cultural diplomacy. The archaeology, the way of life and civilisation that have bound these two fraternal people have served as a good stepping stone in cultural relations, particularly during times when politics could heat up or be influenced by international pressure. Persian language and literature in Indian culture have also been a critical bridge between the two countries¹⁶.

Since that time, Persian has established itself as a significant language within the Indian subcontinent. The influx of Iranian migrants to India intensified from the 14th century CE, reaching a zenith in the influence of Persian culture and language during the Timurid era (1370-1507 CE). Following the rise of the Safavid dynasty in Iran, a substantial number of Iranian poets and scholars migrated to the Indian subcontinent, leading to a situation where Persian language and culture became more widespread in this region than in Isfahan, which served as the Safavid capital. For centuries, Persian functioned as a court language in India, garnering interest among native Indians who sought to learn it. Consequently, this language permeated various forms of written and spoken communication. Numerous Iranian texts have been translated into regional languages such as Gujarati, Telugu, and Punjabi. Additionally, there are many stone carvings and plaster inscriptions featuring Persian script found across India. A wealth of handwritten manuscripts from the era of Humayun (1508-1556 CE), a Mughal emperor, also exists. Although Humayun initially lost his territories to Sher Shah Suri—the founder of India's Sur Empire—he reclaimed them 15 years later with assistance from the Safavids. His return from Persia was marked by an influx of noblemen who significantly impacted India's art, architecture, language, and literature. The Adil Shahi dynasty kings ruled over southern India's Deccan region from 1489 to 1686 CE and were prominent patrons of poetry and poets. Their deep cultural ties with Iran attracted many Persian poets, scholars, and writers to their capital. Supported by these rulers and benefiting from the region's favorable conditions, many individuals migrated from Iran to this area; for some, traveling to Deccan may have been more feasible than going to Delhi.

Today, India possesses a wealth of rare books written in Persian, underscoring the language's lasting influence in the nation. The waning of Indo-Persian began in

the 1830s, paralleling the British East India Company's choice to cease its role as an official language. For several centuries before British colonisation, Persian was a principal administrative language throughout the Indian subcontinent¹⁷.

Institutional Engagement between India and Iran

India and Iran have collaborated through their academic institutions to deepen their understanding of each other's societies, cultures, and economic interactions, particularly over the past four to five decades. It is evident that, within the realm of international studies, Iran has become a significant focus for researchers and policymakers in India. Over time, India has grown into a popular travel destination for Iranian tourists, with approximately 40,000 Iranians visiting annually for various reasons. In February 2011, India streamlined the process of tourist visa collection in Tehran to enhance visa services for these travellers.

Examining the educational history related to cultural heritage preservation in both nations reveals that Iran established its educational infrastructure between 1979 and 1989 more effectively than India by offering specialised programs. Conversely, from 1989 onward, the Indian government has concentrated on advancing higher education in areas such as art history, conservation, and museology. The Pardis College of Art in Isfahan emerged as a leader in Iran by providing degrees focused on the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage and monuments. Subsequently, the Iran Cultural Heritage Organisation launched its own higher education program in this field due to its role as an overarching institution responsible for safeguarding museum collections and historical sites across the country. In contrast, India's National Museum Institute was also a trailblazer; its distinctiveness lies in its affiliation with one of India's largest museums¹⁸.

It is noteworthy to highlight the establishment of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between various significant educational and cultural institutions in India and Iran. A considerable number of Iranian students are studying in India, while Indian students also pursue their education in Iran. The Indo-Iran Society, founded in 1963 by prominent figures such as the late Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, former President of India, and Mr. B.D. Jatti, former Vice-President of India, continues to play an essential role in strengthening the ties between these two great civilisations. The society has made significant strides in broadening its initiatives and encourages scholars to engage in research related to Indo-Iranian heritage, thereby enhancing the existing amicable cultural relations between India and Iran.

Conversely, there exists a small Indian community within Iran, which includes a Sikh temple (Gurdwara) in Tehran and several Hindu temples located in Bandar Abbas and Zahedan. These places of worship were established in the 19th century by Indian soldiers serving with the British Army. There are minor communities within India that can trace their roots back to Iran. While the Indian population in Iran was once substantial, it has since diminished to approximately 200 families currently residing primarily in Tehran and around 20 families increasing gradually in Zahedan. About 800 Indian students are studying in Iran, many of whom focus on theological studies in Qom. Furthermore, an Indian school operated by the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan is present both in Tehran and Zahedan.

Educational engagement

Currently, more than 10,000 Iranian students are studying across different educational institutions in India, with approximately 6,000 of them located in the

southern regions of the country. Each year, the Indian government offers 67 scholarships to Iranian students through various programs such as ITEC, ICCR, Colombo Plan, and IOR-ARC. The enrollment numbers are on the rise, particularly at universities in Pune and Bangalore. Additionally, India plans to establish a Cultural Centre in Tehran. Conversely, Iran operates two Cultural Centres situated in Delhi and Mumbai¹⁹.

During the Cold War period, and mainly after globalisation and liberalisation drives started in the region in the early 1990s, Indian universities and research institutions have shown more interest in understanding various aspects of India-Iran relations under the Area Studies programme. The strong relations between India and Iran and the impact of Iranian culture and language have laid the foundation of a strong cultural relationship between the two countries. The impact of Persian culture in multiple forms is obvious in Indian cultural life. Besides the study of other aspects of Indo-Iran relations, researchers have paid attention towards the cultural relations between the two countries. In this context, the basic approach of this chapter is to highlight the contemporary literature in book articles, research theses, related to India and Iran relations in the area of art and architecture, transfer of technology in this context, covering the Mughal and Safavid period²⁰.

A rising number of Iranian students are attending universities in India, particularly in Pune and Bengaluru. The clerical regime in Tehran positions itself as a prominent representative of Shiites globally, including those in India. Indian Shiite communities receive government backing, exemplified by an officially recognised national holiday for Muharram. Lucknow remains a significant hub for Shiite culture and Persian studies within the subcontinent²¹.

Persian continued to serve as a court language long after the demise of the Mughals and remained quite influential during the subsequent phase of Indian History. This linguistic affinity has fostered academic exchange, which is driven by institutions of higher learning in both countries. Both of these study programs are indebted to the help of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). India is among the other important actors in this field, which has provided aid for the promotion of Persian language studies in Iran and encouraged cultural exchange between Iran and India. Educational collaboration has been the other major aspect of cultural diplomacy. Iranian students have always been drawn to Indian universities, especially those offering courses in engineering, medicine and IT²².

Films/Cinema as entertainment tools

Films and entertainment are also a special vector of soft power. Bollywood has a dominant presence in Iran, with many of its films being widely known there. However, India banned the screening of movies in 1979 and consequently, Indian cinema was legalised only around the reformist era. The family values, social justice, and cultural diversity in Indian films found their empathetic response among the Iranian public, giving them an image of a society more desirable than that which they lived in²³.

The expanding Iranian film industry seeks technical support and creative inspiration from India's Bollywood. Iranian cinema has always captivated audiences with its unique charm, highlighting everyday incidents and aspects of life that reflect the lifestyle, religion, and beliefs of its people. Indian filmmakers perceive Iranian films as being grounded in reality, portraying the true essence of life within the country. In contrast, it can be challenging for directors in India to create films that resonate with every segment of society. A film critic noted that

while filmmaking resources in Iran may not be on par with those in India, Iranian films have still garnered accolades at all major international film festivals. Conversely, Indian films often make headlines only when they secure a spot at an international exhibition.

During the fifth international film festival held in Jaipur, one of India's historic cities, in January 2013, around 217 short, animated, and feature films from 90 countries were showcased. The event celebrated excellence by distributing 24 awards among filmmakers, including two jury awards for Iranian entries. The Jaipur film festival aimed to foster closer ties within the global film community and offer diverse perspectives on filmmaking from various nations. Notably, two out of five Iranian films received awards at this festival, with jury members recognising their contributions as significant highlights of the event.

There is a growing interest among film enthusiasts and creators towards Iranian cinema due to its clarity and artistic approach. This appeal is particularly strong among Indian audiences because of the long-standing cultural and traditional connections between India and Iran. Like many places around the world, Bollywood enjoys immense popularity in Iran, especially among the middle class and lower middle class demographics²⁴.

Architecture

The Taj Mahal, a mausoleum constructed from ivory-white marble, is situated on the right bank of the Yamuna River in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India. It stands as one of India's most renowned monuments, attracting millions of tourists annually from various parts of the globe. Commissioned by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in honour of his wife, this grand structure is celebrated as a pinnacle of

Muslim artistry in India and is regarded as one of the world's treasured masterpieces. Notably, Shah Jahan himself was interred within its walls.

The name "Taj Mahal" has Persian origins, reflecting its architectural design that blends elements from Iranian, Indian, and Islamic styles. The construction was executed by Iranian architects Ahmad Lahori and his brother Hamid.

According to UNESCO, the Taj Mahal's distinctiveness stems from several innovative approaches employed by its horticultural planners and architects. One notable feature is the decision to position the tomb at one end of the quadripartite garden instead of centring it, which enhances depth and perspective when viewed from a distance. Due to its unique layout, thoughtful design, and historical significance, the Persian garden has drawn considerable interest from designers worldwide. Evidence suggests that Muslim Iranian artists significantly contributed to garden design in Kashmir.

Based on historical documentation, it seems that these gardens were created in a style similar to that of Persian gardens, characterised by terraces surrounding a central water channel. These terraces included fountains and were populated with a variety of flowers and trees, which flourished abundantly in the valley.

Cultural instruments and its influence

Indian culture stands as one of the world's oldest traditions, having preserved its richness through numerous challenges over the centuries. This vibrant culture, characterised by a unique blend of elements such as arts, crafts, music, and cuisine, has attracted a significant number of Iranian tourists. The increasing flow

of Iranian visitors to India has paved the way for enhanced connections between Indian and Iranian cities, fostering greater interactions between their populations. In Iran, the notable presence of the "Incredible India" campaign reflects this burgeoning relationship. Currently, only a few thousand Iranians travel to India, while even fewer Indians visit Iran. However, there is a rising trend of Iranian students pursuing higher education in India, particularly in Northern cities like Pune and Bangalore²⁵.

Since India has been a destination for numerous Iranian immigrants over the centuries, the Persian language flourished in this region, and elements of Iranian culture have integrated into the daily lives of many Indians. A notable example is Nowruz, or the Iranian New Year, which is celebrated in India. Various states participate in this observance for distinct reasons and with different associated beliefs, reflecting a blend of cultural and religious significance. Although it is most prominently celebrated in Maharashtra and Gujarat, the Persian New Year is also referred to as Pateti²⁶.

India has gradually become a preferred travel destination for Iranian tourists, attracting approximately 40,000 visitors each year for diverse reasons. In February 2011, India successfully delegated the collection of tourist visas in Tehran to enhance visa processing services for Iranian travellers heading to India. The two culturally rich nations have established an agreement aimed at simplifying visa regulations to foster better interactions among their citizens, including tourists, businesspeople, pilgrims, and educators.

Both India and Iran support ongoing cultural and educational exchanges. Following a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in January 2008 between the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in New Delhi and the

Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation (ICHHTO), several Iranian cultural weeks have been held across various states in India, including New Delhi and Mumbai. These events featured numerous cultural programs along with exhibitions showcasing art and craft artefacts during April-May 2008.

India hosted its “Days of Culture” at the Niyavaran Palace in Tehran and Hafezia in Shiraz from May 10-17, 2011. This event attracted over twenty thousand attendees and was dedicated to honouring Rabindranath Tagore, the renowned Bengali poet and philosopher from India. The festival included live musical performances by Indian artists, a food festival with real-time cooking demonstrations by chefs from ITDC, a handicraft exhibition featuring artisans from India, as well as an Indian film festival and tourism exposition.

In May 2012, the Indian Embassy organised an Indian Cultural Week at the Iran Artists Forum in Tehran that showcased live musical performances by groups from India alongside another handicraft exhibition. Throughout 2011-12, various events were held across Iran to celebrate Tagore's birth anniversary; Tagore had visited Iran in 1935, during which he composed a poem about the country²⁷.

Religious and spiritualism

Another aspect of cultural diplomacy involves the realms of religion and spirituality. While Iran predominantly practices Shia Islam and India boasts a rich tapestry of religious diversity, initiatives have been introduced to foster interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. The Indian Sufi tradition, influenced by

Persian thought, has successfully preserved a harmonious coexistence between the spiritual legacies of both India and Persia²⁸.

While the Indian community in Iran is smaller compared to that in other nations, this has played a role in maintaining strong interpersonal connections. Indian migrants, particularly those working in information technology and healthcare, have contributed to sustaining balanced relations between India and Iran. Additionally, the small yet notable group of Iranians residing in India has fostered cultural ties between the two nations. The exchange of cultural items such as handicrafts, textiles, and artworks represents another dimension of cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, Iran's renowned carpets and traditional products have gained traction in Indian markets. These interactions have ensured that trade and cultural exchanges continue to thrive, even during periods when regulations restricted official trade activities²⁹.

Social media and cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy has found new avenues in the digital world. Social media, online courses and digital cultural exchange offer new ways to keep the two societies connected. Such digital platforms have been especially important in times when physical exchanges that might otherwise occur (were it not for sanctions or other reasons) are limited³⁰.

The medical and pharmaceutical cooperation in finding a solution to the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most recent examples of soft power. In spite of sanctions, new restrictions and limitations imposed upon various countries, India sent much-needed medical supplies and surgical expertise to Iran when the

pandemic first appeared, signalling human solidarity and the validity of bilateral cooperation in times of global challenges³¹.

Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments

India's soft power has been put to good use on another front, namely cultural preservation. Joint efforts to preserve and promote Persian cultural heritage in India, including in the field of restoration of monuments as well as conserving Persian manuscripts, reflect India's appreciation of shared culture and its responsibility to maintain civilizational links³². Cultural and people-to-people exchanges during the sanctions era highlight how India sustained contacts among ordinary persons amidst other political challenges. Indian universities were still accepting Iranian students, and exchange programs remained despite limitations on government-to-government cooperation. Such exchanges served to maintain that substantial base for bilateral ties in the long run³³. The emergence of new payment mechanisms for trade is therefore a creative implementation of the concept of soft power. Since the traditional banking system faced disruption to accommodate international sanctions, both India and Iran had been resorting to rupee-based payment mechanisms and barter trade options for continued economic engagements. Although these devices were in an economic realm, they also revealed both nations' determination to hold on to one another despite outside pressures³⁴.

Indo-Iranian Bilateral Cultural Agreement

In May 1951, Maulana Azad paid a visit to the countries of the East and West. He visited the United Kingdom, Egypt, Iran and other countries and left happy memories in the hearts of Indians living there and a permanent place for India in the hearts of the people of those countries.

It was on the 1st December, 1956, that an Indo-Iranian Cultural Agreement was signed by both countries through their respective plenipotentiaries-Maulana Azad on behalf of the Government of India and His Excellency Dr. A.A. Hekmat, the Iranian Ambassador in India, on behalf of the Iranian Government.

This Cultural Agreement gave them a concrete shape. The two governments undertook to spare no efforts in reciprocal exchange of books, publications students, teacher and research scholars, to do all that was necessary for the growth of good-will between the people of Iran and India and the strengthening of cultural ties between them. The two amicable nations, Iran and India, have consistently worked together to promote knowledge and enhance each other's cultural heritage. This Agreement reinstates that prosperous period, allowing them to collaborate in the realms of art and literature.

This Cultural Agreement has given them a concrete shape. The two governments have undertaken to space no efforts in reciprocal exchange of books, publications, students, teachers and research scholars, to popularise the language and literature pertaining to each other, to translate each other's books and publications and to do all that is necessary for the growth of good-will between the people of Iran and India and the strengthening of cultural ties between them. Now they are reviving that golden era to serve art and literature in cooperation with each other.

Besides the age-old mutual links, this agreement also has a long background. When a cultural delegation consisting of Messts A.A. Hekmat, Pour-e-Daoud and

the late Rashid-e-Yasemi came from Iran to India, the issue came under discussion with the Indian authorities. Later, the efforts for achieving this objective were continued. Meanwhile, India's struggle for freedom bore fruit and the country was blessed with independence. When Dr. Hekmat came to India as Iran's Ambassador, this issue was pursued by the two governments and by the grace of God, under the guidance of the Shahanshah of Iran and the keen interest and goodwill of his Excellency Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Honourable Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad this agreement came into existence and was signed on the date mentioned above.

The best and the heartfelt desires of the two nations found expression in the speeches of Hon. Maulana Azad and Dr. Hekmat, which they delivered immediately after they had signed the Cultural Agreement. Hon. Maulana Azad emphasised the importance of the agreement and threw light on the ancient relations existing between the two countries. Dr. Hekmat said that usually the agreements were first signed and then executed, but this was the unique agreement already in force for centuries, even before it was signed. Thus, they would lead the caravan of human knowledge further still further and the benefits will go to their respective countries and the rest of the world in general.

The Tehran Declaration (April 10, 2001)

The following is the gist of the Tehran Declaration signed by the Prime Minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr. Ayatullah Mohammed Khatami, in Tehran on 10th April, 2001.

The Tehran Declaration emphasised the following aspects. The declaration affirms that respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, equality and non-interference in each other's internal affairs are fundamental principles of friendly relations amongst States. It also emphasised that only an equitable, pluralistic and co-operative international order can address the challenges of our era.

Affirming that Dialogue among Civilisations, as a new paradigm in international relations, provides a conducive ground for constructive interaction and effective co-operation, call upon the international community in this UN year of Dialogue among Civilisations, to rededicate itself to the principles of tolerance, pluralism and respect for diversity and to share its commitment to promote the concept of dialogue among civilisations.

Both sides express concern over restrictions on exports to developing countries of material, equipment and technology for peaceful purposes and reaffirm, in this context, the right of States to development, research, production and use of technology, material and equipment for such purposes.

Both sides affirm the importance of the preservation of peace, security and stability in the region. Mutually beneficial trade and transportation links, as well as regional economic co-operation among the countries of the region, are essential factors for the progress and development of the entire region. The Sides note in particular the importance of a secure and peaceful environment to the development of commerce and the promotion of economic growth in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean regions. Both countries condemn terrorism in all its forms. The parties acknowledge the significant dangers that international terrorism and extremism present to nation-states as well as global peace and

security. They also condemn states that aid, abet, and directly support international terrorism and call on the international community to intensify its efforts to combat international terrorism. They reaffirm their commitment to enhancing global consensus and legal frameworks aimed at combating terrorism, including the expedited completion of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. Building on their dedication to fostering socio-economic development and prosperity for their populations, both parties concur to initiate a new stage of cooperative efforts that will focus on mutually advantageous collaboration, particularly in the fields of energy, transit and transportation, industry, agriculture, and services. They also agree to actively promote scientific and technological cooperation, including among others, joint research projects, short and long-term training courses and exchange of related information on a regular basis.

Both countries emphasised the important role played by cultural interaction in promoting bilateral relations and establishing peace and stability among nations, and agreed to take necessary steps by the concerned bodies of the two countries in expanding cultural and artistic cooperation in all fields. The sides agreed to facilitate tourism between the two countries.

Both countries welcome the role played by interaction between the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Indian Parliament to enhance people-to-people exchanges in promoting mutual understanding and dialogue, and resolve the multicultural problematic issues.³⁵

India-Iran Joint Economic Commission

Significant among the various interactions was the recent 17th India-Iran Joint Economic Commission meeting held in Tehran on May 4, 2013. The External Affairs Minister of India, Salman Khurshid, and his Iranian counterpart, Ali Akbar Salehi, engaged in discussions concerning important bilateral and regional matters within the framework of the joint commission. Topics included regional connectivity, boosting bilateral trade and economic cooperation, addressing regional security concerns, and fostering cultural exchanges and people-to-people connections.

In terms of enhancing cultural ties and interpersonal relations, this effort further strengthens the cultural bonds between the two nations. During the visit of the External Affairs Minister, an Indian Cultural Centre was inaugurated in Tehran. Previously, India had no cultural centres, while Iran maintained several in India; thus, the establishment of this centre holds historical and cultural significance. To promote greater interaction among citizens, both sides recognised the necessity to relax visa restrictions. Additionally, several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were signed during this visit: one between the Institute of Standards and Industrial Research of Islamic Republic of Iran (ISIRI) and the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), another between India's Foreign Service Institute within the Ministry of External Affairs and Iran's School of International Relations under its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as an MoU regarding cooperation in water resources management between the governments of India and Iran³⁶.

India-Iran Bilateral Cultural Agreements

On May 23, 2016, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran, a bilateral cultural agreement between India and Iran was signed. India and Iran have a long history of bilateral cultural agreements, including the India-Iran Cultural Exchange Programme, which facilitates exchanges through lectures, exhibitions, scholarships, and film screenings. Recent agreements include Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) on topics like medical products regulation and customs cooperation, as well as ongoing collaboration in science and technology and cultural exchanges via the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Tehran. The agreements aim to promote people-to-people ties, a rich history of shared culture, and intellectual exchange.

Key aspects of the agreements

Cultural Exchange Programme

These programs are designed to promote cultural and intellectual exchanges through various means, including arranging lectures, art exhibitions, and concerts. Organising visits and awarding scholarships to students. Encouraging collaboration between scientific, artistic, and literary societies. Promoting the translation of literary works between Persian and Indian languages.

Educational and academic collaboration:

Agreements focus on establishing chairs in universities for teaching subjects related to each other's countries and facilitating the exchange of books and periodicals.

Cultural institutions:

The Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Tehran is a key institution for furthering these ties.

Promoting shared heritage:

The agreements seek to promote understanding and appreciation of each other's history, language, and art through various media, such as film and radio.

Cooperation in specific areas:

In addition to cultural exchanges, recent agreements have covered other areas of cooperation, such as, Medical products regulation, Customs cooperation, and Science and technology cooperation.

Focus on people-to-people ties:

The agreements are intended to strengthen the long-standing people-to-people connections rooted in a shared history and culture³⁷.

Multilateral Diplomacy through International Forums

India's use of soft power vis-à-vis Iran has been particularly evident in the country's multilateral diplomacy and collaboration with it on international forums. This aspect of the relationship has enabled both countries to act jointly on global matters and build wider coalitions around shared interests and values. Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was also a key platform for India-Iran cooperation, having both countries shared a commitment to the ideals of non-alignment and South-South cooperation. As part of NAM, Iran's relation with India (despite some ideological differences between other member states and it) was instrumental to collaborating on issues that held mutual interests like anti-

unilateralism and a multilateral way to address international affairs³⁸. India and Iran have had many joint initiatives in the United Nations system, especially on development cooperation, global commons and institutional reform. Both countries have called for the reform of international financial institutions to be more representative of the modern global economy and for developing countries' increased representation at global governance bodies³⁹. Regional entities have offered other avenues of cooperation between India and Iran. Iran's admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) provides further opportunities for cooperation with India, which was made a full member in 2017. Both nations have used the SCO platform to work together on shared concerns, including regional security, economic investments and connectivity initiatives⁴⁰.

Another dimension is economic multilateralism. Both officials were members of various South-South regional cooperation efforts and have advocated alternative means of international economic cooperation. The Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) forum, including Iran as observer in which both the forms have given their support, in principle, has set an example for a new form of multilateral cooperation⁴¹. Cultural multilateralism and educational multilateralism may be organised through bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and other international cultural arenas. The two countries have engaged in cooperation to protect and promote cultural heritage, facilitate bilateral educational exchanges, as well as promote global cultural diversity⁴². This has also been a multilateral aspect of engagement, in terms of international legal co-operation. Both have generally favoured a strict interpretation of international law, sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. They have frequently exchanged similar positions on the use of force in international relations and the necessity for peaceful resolution of disputes⁴³. Counter-terrorism cooperation, however, has been difficult because of divergent views on certain regional matters, and yet this

is another realm in which the two countries have found a common cause in multilateral settings. They are both countries that have suffered from terrorist action and have expressed their willingness to cooperate with the international community in combating terrorism, even if sometimes they may have divergent strategies in certain regional contexts⁴⁴.

India's soft power diplomacy with Iran which value long-term relations having its long-term vision over short-term strategy to interacting. That it has managed to keep both left and right mild in the wake of substantial challenges attests to the enduring utility of soft power as an instrument of statecraft. Nevertheless, the constraints experienced also serve to highlight the need for soft power approaches to be tempered with good strategic planning and a realistic appreciation of international limitations. While the two countries develop and evolve, and while we experience more transformation in the international system, India-Iran relations will remain an exciting case to consider when it comes to soft power diplomacy. Over time, common cultural and civilizational interests have given the relationship an important source of stability in chaotic times. India's policy of continuous cultural diplomacy, educational collaboration and people-to-people exchange has kept the emotional connect alive, which reflects in bilateral relations.

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Chapter-V

External Factors and India-Iran Bilateral Relations.

India-Iran bilateral relations are one of the most intricate aspects in today's international scene, driven by the depth of historical links as well as complementarity that both have to offer one another in terms of economic interests and strategic imperatives. However, their bilateral relations have always been limited by external pressures and strategic calculations. India-Iran bilateral relations has been limited by the involvement of external powers and their interest perceptions contradictory to the national interest. India and Iran's bilateral relations has been drastically transformed since India's policy of economic liberalization inaugurated in 1991. India and Iran's diplomatic relations go beyond its formal bilateral merits, to include regional stability, energy security, connectivity initiatives and the strategic power dynamics in South and West Asia. India is one of the crucial strategic partners for Iran, with its expanding economy and infrastructure potential and high demand for the thrust for energy needs, in return Iran's strategic position would be helpful for India to have its foothold in Central Asia, Russia, Afghanistan and the international markets. To materialise the national interest of India's presence and influence are needed over Afghanistan, Central Asia and even beyond. However, India's strategic calculations have always been limited by the policies and manoeuvres of external players with their own strategic goals and ambitions.

From the year of 1991–2022, there have been strategic transitions in world affair accounting the end of the Cold War and emergence of a US-dominated bipolar moment, China's rise as a global challenger, albeit quietly at first, Russia's re-emergence on to the world stage, changes in Middle Eastern dynamics following 9/11 and Arab Spring uprisings, and ongoing changes toward an increasingly multipolar world order. Amid these churning, external powers such as US, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Pakistan and Afghanistan and their strategic interest have been central to shaping the curve of India-Iran bilateral engagement.

This chapter maps the ways in which each of these external dynamics has affected India-Iran strategic and economic relations, disentangling the channels through which outside pressures have operated, the reactions of both India and Iran to these pressures, and how such external dynamics have changed over the period of time. The study further suggests that although a number of external constraints have played out to clearly circumscribe the extent and substance of Indo-Iranian cooperation, both actors have shown extraordinary resilience in coping up with these challenges without derailing over core aspects governing their bilateral relations.

India- Iran Relations and International Environment After the Disintegration of the Soviet Union.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Indian's foreign policy of economic liberalisation, a new era began in India's transition towards bilateral relations with Iran. The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War also eliminated the bipolar balance that defined much of India's foreign policy non-alignment for more than four decades. Opening of the Indian economy started by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and followed by the then governments required a more practical foreign policy emphasis on economic diplomacy and energy security. This transition also occurred at a time when Iran was attempting to reconstitute its war-torn economy after the catastrophic eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88), and emerged out of isolation which it suffered in the early years after the Islamic Revolution. Several pillars had propped up the India-Iran relationship during the 1990s and these fundamentals would endure, in spite of outside pressures. Age-old connections, religious links and mutual respect for civilisational heritage spanning thousands of years had created a solid base for the rekindled engagement¹. Economic complementarity also played an important role, as India's demand for energy coincided with Iran's longing to increase its export markets and diminish reliance on the traditional Western buyers. Political

strategy was a major factor in the rapprochement as well. Both India and Iran were confronted with security issues from Pakistani militant groups, which has converged interests in counterterrorism cooperation. The geostrategic position of Iran also provided India with a possible route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, that were increasingly becoming important for India's security and economic benefits. This strategic partnership was epitomised by the development of Iran's Chabahar port which may provide link to Afghanistan through Pakistan's territory. Even in this initial phase, however, the factors on the periphery cast their shadows on Indo-Iranian relations. The United States, the world's dominant military and economic power saw Iran in terms of containment, backing that policy with blanket sanctions that made it difficult for any nation to do business in Tehran. The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, subsequently augmented to comprise additional nations, established a system of secondary sanctions that warned non-US entities against conspicuous commerce with Iran².

Russia's approach to India and Iran in this period was also pragmatic, a policy of cooperation but at the same time intense competitiveness for influence in both Central Asia and the Caspian-sea region. Russia continued to provide for the defense needs of each country, but was unwilling to foster alliances that would be detrimental to its own regional interests. China, being an economic global power, with minimal engagement with both country focused on economic development instead of expanding its territorial influence in the region. Along with china, other regional powers have their foothold to shape India-Iran relations. Saudi Arabia, as the guardian of Sunni Islam and ally to both the United States and Pakistan, was suspicious of Iran's revolutionary Shia ideology. Saudi influence on Pakistan along with Saudi financing of a number of religious factions had also made India-Iran cooperation more challenging, especially in those proxy conflicts that were transpiring in Afghanistan. The demonstrative aspect of Pakistan being a spoiler in India-Iran relations was well evident as Islamabad did everything to derail any

strategic partnership that would exist between Iran and India, as India has used access routes in an alternate one via Central Asia to enter the landlocked country or gained stakes in Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan's proximity to Saudi Arabia and its nascent association with China also gave it leverage to disrupt or complicate India-Iran moves.

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s introduced new dynamics that drew India and Iran together while also complicating their ties. Both states were opposed to the Taliban's religious extremism and supported the Northern Alliance, providing a foundation for cooperation. But the Taliban's links with Pakistan and the role of other external stakeholders in Afghanistan made India-Iran collaboration a more problematic and challenging nature.

The American Involvement and Its Strategy.

Since 1991, the United States having employed a combination of trade sanctions, diplomacy and strategic inducements to put a break on India-Iran specific arrangement on regional development and economic bilateralism. audience. The US has been apprehensive of number of problems such as, the Iranian nuclear programme, Iran's support for terrorist groups, its opposition to an Arab-Israeli peace process and its challenge to American hegemony in the Persian Gulf. US foreign Policy Doctrine during the Clinton administration was characterised by "dual containment" strategy toward Iran and Iraq on regional stability and security. This policy was explicitly aimed at economically and diplomatically isolating Iran, with U.S. economic muscle and alliance relationships being used to force third countries to curtail engagement with Tehran. The Iran libia Sanctions Act (ILBSA), a turning point in the extraterritorial application of US sanctions, providing for penalties against those foreign firms investing \$20 million or more per year in Iran's petroleum and natural gas industries³. For India, American sanctions made for a fundamental contradiction in its expanding strategic relationship with the United States and its

energy security imperatives and regional interests. India's breakneck economic expansion, which averaged more than 6% a year generated huge energy requirements that Iran was well positioned to help fulfill. India's geographical proximity to Iran, the country's huge capacity of oil and gas reserves as well as its acceptance of Indian rupees for payments made it a potentially lucrative energy partner. But American sanctions put on limitations in the economic ties between India and Iran.

George Bush administration's branding of Iran as part of an "axis of evil" after the September 11 attacks represented a new level in US efforts to squeeze Iran and, by extension, any nation with ties to Tehran. Iran's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism and the US sanctions put a new dimension in the bilateral relations of India and Iran. The broader realm of American sanctions was widened with the passing of the Iran Freedom and Support¹ Act of 2006, punishing not only investments in Iranian oil specifically but also all financial dealings or technology transfers⁴. India's reaction to American pressures over Iran was illustrative of the tightrope walk that New Delhi aspired to in its strategic partnership with Washington and its national interests. India did buckle on several occasions under pressure from the US, prominently in 2008 when it voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) despite its vocal domestic critics. This choice embodied India's preference to go ahead with the US-India civilian nuclear deal that would take care of its energy security concerns through an alternative channel⁵.

The Obama administration's policies on Iran sanctions bridged continuity and change in American strategy, that the administration conducted with Iran, leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 and other agreements. This nuke deal provided some interim relief to sanctions on Iran thus providing a room for an enhanced economic intercourse between India and Iran. In this period, India ramped up imports of oil from Iran and expedited the

construction of a port in Chabahar. Instead, the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA in May 2018 and then execute a policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran laid down toughest limitations on India-Iran relations over past several decades. The re-enactment of sweeping sanctions along with looming threats of "secondary sanctions" on countries that continued to trade and cooperate economically with Iran led India to make drastic cuts in its reliance upon Iranian oil purchases, as well as suspending a number of bilateral projects⁶. American pressure was especially potent based on India's deep links to the international financial system that is run mostly by American institutions. Indian companies and banks risked being blocked from dollar payments and American markets if they maintained large business relationships with Iran. This had an important channelling effect beyond the strict law on sanction compliance. United States influence was also imposed on the basis of strategic sweeteners and diplomatic arm-twisting. Prospects of strengthened defense cooperation, transferring technology and helping India in realizing its global ambitions incentivized the downsizing of Indo-Iranian relations. At the same time, American diplomats repeatedly voiced concerns about India-Iran cooperation in bilateral meetings and tied it to broader questions of India's reliability as a strategic partner.

There have been some changes in the Biden administration's including new diplomatic contacts and talk of returning to the framework of the JCPOA. But the overall architecture of sanctions on Iran is very much intact, to India's disadvantage in its economic relations with Iran. "With the administration keen on deepening partnerships with Indo-Pacific allies and partners, new dynamics are emerging. The US pressure over Iran on India has been most effective during this entire process when it comes with positive signs and inducement for compliance. The civil nuclear deals, arms technology and help for India joining the UN Security Council that are either specifically or implied to be tied to Indian

mound biting on Iran policy. This carrot-and-stick seems to work better than the stick alone in getting Indian behaviour to change.

The cumulative effect of all this American pressure has been immense, but not complete. Even as India has largely curtailed its economic dealings with Iran when faced with heavy American pressure, it has kept up diplomatic ties and some cooperation in select areas of strategic importance. The continued development of Chabahar port, despite American sanctions, shows that India still wants to maintain some key aspects of the relationship even under pressure.

The Russian Involvement and Strategic Competition.

The role of Russia has made the interaction between India and Iran more nuanced which is a combination of cooperation, competition, and strategic calculus, while dynamics have altered drastically since 1991. Being a historical friend of India and Iran, Russia has traditionally been positively disposed towards closer relationship between the two while keeping in mind its own national interests. But in the present context, Russia's reaction has been one of strategic hedging cultivating relations with both partners and not allowing an independent India-Iran axis that could endanger its stakes in the region. Initially, the breakup of the Soviet Union clouded Russia's engagement in South and West Asia. However, Moscow quickly regained purchase by establishing strategic partnerships with regional powers. Russia in the 1990s, like other members of the former Soviet-led military alliance Warsaw Pact, was a reflection of Cold War era defense cooperation, technology transfer and diplomatic policy. Russia's connection with India is based on a history of close arms sales ties rightly from decades, as in the past, Moscow's ties with Tehran had been through shared resistance to American domination and mutual interests in energy markets and regional stability. The most visible support displayed by Russia towards India's relations with Iran has in the field of regional stability in the multilateral forums. While it was largely aimed at Sino-Russian ties, the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation (SCO) in 2001 also presented an opportunity for rapprochement between India and its traditional partner Iran within the Russian framework. Russia backed the eventual admission of India and Iran to the SCO processes, a development that it sees as enhancing the influence of the SCO and alternatives to West-oriented institutions⁷.

India-Iran relations apart from energy issues, Russia's policies have in general eased the India-Iran relationship. Russia as a major exporter of energy could not fail to understand the significance of diversified supply relations and thus, it was not antagonized by India-Iran energy cooperation. Russia sometimes actively supported such cooperation, for example, by providing technical assistance to Iranian energy infrastructure and by promoting alternative payment mechanisms that could bypass Western sanctions. Yet, Russia's own strategic calculus and competing interests too have shaped its handling of India-Iran relations. In the nuclear issue, Russia has pursued a delicate policy of supplying and upgrading civil nuclear reactors in Iran while cooperating with international non-proliferation efforts. Russia also continued to build Iran's Bushehr reactor in the face of international opposition, which showed Moscow's commitment to its relationship with Tehran, yet Russian officials were at pains to stress adherence to international safeguards and cooperation with IAEA supervision⁸.

Russia's military relations with India and Iran have provided both opportunities and challenges to bilateral ties. Russia is one of the biggest suppliers of military hardware to India and has backed most Indian procurement's for defense modernization which could enhance its capabilities in the Persian Gulf area. Russia has been more skittish about arms sales to Iran, especially those where the systems might change regional military equilibriums or create an American response.

The Syrian conflict from 2011, for its part, has shown both what it's produced in terms of Russia-Iran convergence and the bounds of that joint enterprise.

Although both backed the Bashar-Al Assad government, their interests and goals have been very different. Russia's objective was not to destabilise but retaining its position in this vital sea for theatre-strategic reasons, to project power; Iran had to keep the "axis of resistance" together and forge links across the land bridge to Lebanon. Due to the marginal role played by India in Middle East wars, the Syrian war had no direct bearing on India-Iran relations. The changing dynamics between Russia and China also play themselves out in India-Iran ties. With the consolidation of some form of a strategic Russia-China relationship especially in response to Western challenges, Russia is increasingly supportive towards Chinese endeavors in South and West Asia. That has created some friction with India which fears Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean, and also has made Russia more wary of steps that could help build up India's capacity to balance China. One of the best such examples in this respect Russia's columns the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a transportation access that connects India with Russia, through Iran. This was an initiative that Russia pushed energetically, as it grappled with the need to define its economic role in a world where maritime arteries were dominated by Western naval forces and that sought to promote greater economic integration throughout Eurasia. Although faced with different external pressures and technical issues, all three countries have backed the corridor's construction⁹.

Russia's posture on American sanctions regarding Iran has been delicately balanced between a variety of competing considerations. Although Moscow has often opposed the extraterritorial impact of American sanctions and condemned unilateral coercive measures, it has also been careful not to confront American sanctions directly in a way that could generate retaliation against Russian interests. This has translated to a general Russian support for India's right to engage with Iran but without substantial help in circumventing some of the specific sanctions. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 has introduced new

dynamics to Russia's relations with both India and Iran. Western sanctions on Russia have pulled Moscow closer to both as it search for partners beyond Western-dominated financial and technological systems even as those moves provide new opportunities for collaboration. Cautious Indian neutrality on the Ukraine issue combined with Iran's deploying its soldiers in Moscow's war against Russia has left some asymmetry in these two countries' ties to Russia.

Russian influence was overall constructive but minimal over India-Iran relations. Russia has sought to support other countries' bilateral efforts, encourage multilateral cooperation and provide alternative venues for collaboration that circumvent Western constraints. But Russia has been unwilling to substantially subjugate its own interests in the ongoing effort to provide support for India-Iran engagement, and at times has said soft and then puts the clamp on fear of offending china and other friends.

Rising China and Its Strategic Calculations.

The rise of China as a global power since 1991 has significantly transformed the strategic landscape in which India-Iran interactions have taken place, opening up new possibilities for partnership as well as competitive dynamics that have shaded bilateral ties. China's policy towards both India and Iran has been one of pragmatic engagement centred on economic interests, pragmatism and strategic equi-distance rather than ideological opposition, consistent with Beijing's broader policy of influence-seeking through economic convergence in the areas of infrastructure.

In the initial phase, China did not have much influence on India-Iran relations because it was preoccupied with domestic economic construction and had yet to be a significant presence in either Middle East or South Asia. Yet, Beijing's rapid economic expansion and growing energy requirements ultimately sucked them more deeply into involvement with Iran, thus providing opportunities as well as

challenges for India-Iran relations. China has developed special relationship with Iran, over the years, especially during active phases of Western sanctions. Chinese companies poured much money into Iranian energy infrastructure, and they emerged as leading buyers of Iranian oil and gas even as Western firms fled under sanctions pressure. And through this economic relationship, Iran has earned vital revenues and access to technology that indirectly enabled its engagement with other players such as India¹⁰.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was conceived by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, has introduced fresh dynamics into India-Iran relations to mirror China's more extensive global aspirations. Iran's role in the BRI as a critical land bridge between East Asia and Europe not only opened up Chinese opportunities for direct investment and infrastructure, but also lessened Tehran's economic reliance on its former neighbours as well. To India, which has stayed out of the BRI because of sovereignty-related concerns surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China's increasing presence in Iran has presented strategic hurdles. China's stance on Iran's nuclear program has been distinctly at odds with that of the United States and its allies, for the most part championing diplomacy but opposing military force. Chinese involvement in the P5+1 talks (China, France, Russia, UK, USA plus Germany), which produced the JCPOA was also indicative of a pro-engagement, as opposed to confrontational approach one that was more closely sympathetic to Indian interests than American policy. Such convergence on Iran's nuclear programme opened possibilities for India-China cooperation on regional issues, but broader strategic rivalries have constrained that possibility.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has, in the context of BRI, posed specific challenges to the India-Iran relationship by bolstering Pakistan's strategic position and connectivity with China. Gwadar port in Pakistan, which is relatively close to Iran's Chahbahar port, has introduced competition for bilateral transit

trade to and from Afghanistan and Central Asia. With billion-dollar investments in CPEC, China has greatly enhanced Pakistan's ability to scuttle or frustrate Indian plans in the region¹¹.

Nonetheless, China's ties with Iran have also opened an avenue for India-Iran partnership, not least in neutralising Chinese influence globally. Both India and Iran have also worried about overreliance on Chinese investment and technology, increasing interest in diversifying relationships. Part of the proposition behind Chabahar port development with Indian assistance, has no doubt been an attempt to give Iran options that are not Chinese dominated as well as provided India with strategic depth. China's arms supply to Iran as well as Pakistan has added further challenges to India's security calculus. Though China itself has been relatively restrained in its military collaboration with Iran owing to international sanctions and UN arms embargoes, its deep defense partnership with Pakistan has boosted Islamabad's ability to power project into the Arabian Sea and shape regional competition. This has led India to be keener on good ties with Iran as a possible counter-weight to Pak-China alliance. The Trump administration's trade war with China and the wider strategic competition between the rival powers has opened up new possibilities for India- Iran collaboration along with other regional powers against Chinese hegemony. The idea of "strategic autonomy" gained currency in middle rungs of the world power ladder, such as India and Iran, to pursue independent policy despite pressure from great powers. This confluence of interests opened up room for greater Indo-Iranian collaboration, even if the latter's follow-through was limited due to US sanctions. China's response to American sanctions against Iran has been bolder than that of many other countries, which have lengthened their own supply lines as a way of avoiding the ire of the United States by continuing to take some oil from Iran. Chinese firms have created other payment options and financial arrangements to make it easier to trade with Iran still avoiding American sanctions. This has afforded Iran vital

economic lifelines at times of isolation and indirectly reinforced its ability to keep the doors open for other partners such as India¹².

The onset of the novel COVID-19 pandemic in China introduced new dynamics to its relations with both India and Iran. The alliance formed between the two countries at the onset of the health crisis gave way to accusations against China over its handling of the initial phases of the pandemic. For India, the pandemic pointed up the perils of over-reliance on Chinese supply chains and bolstered arguments for economic diversification including more extensive ties with countries such as Iran. China's expanding naval footprint in the Indian Ocean area has introduced new strategic pressures for India and Iran. China's naval expansion has been justified as being necessary for securing expanding trade relations, for instance with Iran, but from India's perspective this presence constituted a strategic threat that called for a response.

Given Iran's geostrategic position, it is a critical ally for India to track and even counterbalance Chinese naval activities in the Arabian Sea and Gulf. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has given a multilateral footing to China-India-Iran cooperation, but due to the India-China rivalry it is hardly an effective framework. China's predominance in the SCO has at times been at odds with India's preferences for more balanced multilateral setups, and Iran before gaining full membership in 2023, was restricted in its influence because of observer status.

China's role in influencing India-Iran ties has been varied and at times contradictory. First, Chinese willingness to trade with Iran under Western sanctions has given Tehran an alternative to India in economic relations and reduced any incentive it might otherwise have had to make concessions on India's concerns. At the same time, fears of China's dominance have provided both India and Iran with a strong incentive to try and beef up bilateral ties as a counterweight to an overpowering reliance on Beijing.

Involvement of Saudi Arabia as a Regional Power.

Saudi Arabia as a player in the India-Iran relationship while Saudi Arabia has always been a regional factor in Indo-Iran relations, the nature of its involvement has had less to do with oil and more with its role as sponsor of Sunni Islam and strategic competitor to Iran for influence within the Middle East and beyond. Saudi Arabia since 1991 With its interests, continued to work towards limiting Iran's regional clout and international entanglements, adding restraints and obstacles in India-Iran relations diplomatically, economically by luring the country with lucrative deals over religion diplomacy and strategic collaborations with other actors. Rivalry between the Saudi and Iranian governments is deep-seated, but has become more intense as of recent times due to international events such as the Arab Spring that unseated secular regimes allied with Riyadh foreboding a threat posed by popular Shi'ite movements inspired by Tehran. Iran's relations improved with many countries in Asia prior to tensions erupting with Europe and the U.S., almost battling against Islamists themselves disguised under democratic guise, with policies in favour of such Islamist-inspired uprisings. That rivalry has been fought on many fronts, including through proxy wars in different areas of the Middle East and elsewhere, for control of Islamic institutions and communities, and attempts to build broad international coalitions with a view to putting limits on the other's influence¹³.

Saudi efforts to contain the India-Iran relationship have been low-intensity but long-term, mainly through its leverage over Pakistan and global Islamic institutions. Riyadh's deep relations with Pakistan, based on a common Sunni identity and military alliance as well as generous Saudi economic aid, have given the Kingdom tremendous strategic leverage over regional developments which influence India-Iran ties. Saudi financial backing of Pakistani religious academies and political organisations has deepened anti-Iranian sentiments in Pakistan while erecting additional barriers to cooperation between India and Iran. Saudi Arabia's

influence on the global Islamic discourse, carried out through institutions like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Muslim World League (MWL) has also impacted India-Iran relations. Efforts by Saudi to surround Iran and propagate Sunni versions of Islam within Islamic institutions have left resentments that seep into bilateral ties. India is not a member of the OIC, but alliance positions on regional issues that it takes directly from Saudi authorities have sometimes made it hard for India-Iran cooperation¹⁴.

Economic rivalry is another channel that Saudi Arabia has used to impact India-Iran relations. One of the leading oil providers in India and source of foreign exchange, Saudi Arabia has had a considerable economic influence on Indian policy. At the context of strain in the relationship between India and Iran, Saudi officials have occasionally suggested that there might be economic costs to a failure to accommodate those concerns, but such pressure has usually taken the form of diplomatic cajoling rather than an overt threat. India-Iran relations has been also influenced by the Saudi and external linkages, in balancing its relationship with the United States together with Persian Gulf partners and neighbours it sees as rivals. Saudi Arabia has ensured that economic sanctions applied by Washington on Iran dovetailed with the Kingdom's strategic interests on putting pressure via coalition of willing partners like India to reduce their ties to Tehran. There's also Saudi collaboration with Israel, which has been institutionalized through the Abraham Accords framework, making for new dynamics that could limit India-Iran ties especially as a result of India's own burgeoning relationship with Israel.

Yet Saudi response to Indo-Iranian relations has not been overtly negative. Pragmatic economic interests of the Kingdom have at times allowed for Indian engagement with Iran, Libya and Lebanon when they do not pose a direct threat to Saudi strategic interests. The Arab Spring in 2011 further fueled the Saudi-Iran rivalry and placed additional restrictions on Indian-Iranian ties. Wars in Syria,

Yemen and other Middle Eastern arenas became proxies for the larger Saudi-Iran fight, as each side backed opposing factions and worked to construct international coalitions. India's position of neutrality in these conflicts sometimes strained relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, but Saudi pressure was usually more potent because of alliance and economic heft. Saudi Arabia's economic transformation plan, "Vision 2030" has introduced a new dynamic in its India-Iran dynamic. The Kingdom, in its endeavour to diversify economy and minimize dependency on oil exports, has shown a growing interest for economic cooperation with big emerging markets including India. This provided an impetus for Saudi Arabia to refrain from anything that could harm its relations with India over Iran, resulting in a more calibrated response than in the previous decades¹⁵.

The killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and international criticism of Saudi Arabia then temporarily opened a window for India-Iran ties to grow because Riyadh's standing suffered as well as its ability to bring pressure on other nations. Nevertheless, this impact was modest and fleeting, given that Saudi Arabia's strategic significance to the United States as well as global energy markets meant it would remain engaged by the world internationally despite human rights abuses. In general Saudi Arabia's policy regarding Iran's nuclear program has relieved with both American and Israeli policies of maximum pressure on Iran, and with the same time it rejects any Iranian capability to produce nuclear weapons. Adding a further layer of complexity is that India's backing for diplomatic options on the nuclear issue has at times clashed with Saudi Arabia's desire for more hawkish responses. And all this has come as the Saudi, as they have looked to normalize relations with some of their regional rivals, such as Qatar and Turkey, reducing a few strains in the region that had formerly made India-Iran ties more complex. However, the basic Saudi-Iran rivalry persists and its impact on regional geopolitics is limiting Indo-Iranian cooperation.

Recent events, such as the Chinese role in mediating an India-Iran rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to begin in 2023, suggests that future influence of Saudi Arabia over India-Iran relations exists. Although diplomatic engagement between Riyadh and Tehran could mitigate some drivers of regional tension, fundamentals of competition and rivalry have been one of the realistic factors.

Saudi economic pressure and strategic relationships may have imposed limits on Indian-Iranian cooperation, but they could not prevent the continuation of basic bilateral relations or collaborations where interests overlap. The Kingdom's intervention has been more successful when it collectively worked with other international actors, especially the United States and regional powers such as Pakistan.

Israel's Involvement and Its Contradictory Approaches

The instrumentalisation of Israel as a major factor in India-Iran ties from 1991 onwards has been one of the most intricate and developing factors governing substantive bilateral relations between New Delhi and Tehran. The normalisation of India-Israel relations in 1992, and their print-to-online development into a sustainable full spectrum partnership, has generated core contradictions between this and New Delhi's historically warm ties with Iran, compelling India to walk a tightrope between two significant but conflicting partners. The establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 marked a departure from India's foreign policy. Israel on account, partly, due to its long-standing support, solidarity with Arab and other Muslim countries plays a critical role effecting India-Iran relations. This new policy form very much resonated with India's reorientation of foreign policy that began after the Cold War, and economic liberalization aimed at its rebuilding of a nation based on realpolitik and not on ideology.¹⁶

For years, Israel's strategic apprehensions regarding Iran's nuclear project and regional supremacy have continually weighed on India to reduce its ties with Tehran. Israeli authorities have expressed their worries of India-Iran cooperation during bilateral meetings, as they view Iran's nuclear program and the country's sponsorship for militant groups a threat to both Israeli and Indian interests. That pressure increased after Iran's nuclear program took on global significance in the early 2000s, when Israeli officials explicitly connected Indian-Iran relations to larger issues of regional security and non-proliferation. One of the most important vectors of Israeli influence on India toward Iran has been defense cooperation. Israel's recent ascendancy as a major supplier of defense equipment and systems to India, encompassing high-end technology for such crucial areas like radar; missiles and intelligence gear has added dependencies that confound Indian policy on Iran. Israeli military hardware has contributed to India's combat capabilities against both Pakistani and Chinese targets thereby giving New Delhi a reason to consider the Israeli reservations with Iran¹⁷.

The evolution of the India-Israel intelligence relationship has placed further limitations on India-Iran ties. Indian-Israeli intelligence sharing, especially on counterterrorism and regional security matters, has given Israel leverage over Indian threat assessments and policy-making. Israeli interpretations of Iranian actions and intent have on occasion contradicted Indian understanding, which leads to internal discussions within the Indian policy making apparatuses concerning how best to respond to Iranian conduct. Israel has also gained an economic lever to influence India's policy toward Iran. Israeli investments in Indian IT sectors, agricultural co-operation and water projects have helped fund constituencies in India that support greater ties with Israel. None of these economic associations are conditional, at least overtly, on how India treats Iran, they provide incentives for not doing things that might injure its ties to Israel.

Yet Israel's hand in Indian-Iran ties is limited by certain factors. Indian energy requirements and strategic stakes in Iran have tended to trump Israeli sensitivities when core Indian interests were involved. Chabahar port continued to be developed despite Israeli objections, suggesting India's resolve to uphold some of the pivotal aspects of its Iran relationship in spite of coercive pressures. India's diplomatic backing for Iran through more than one international crisis has also remained in place, while Israel has wanted Tehran to be isolated. India's Relationship with Israel vs. Iran particularly the nuclear issue of Iran has put the most pressure on relations between India and Israel along with Iran. Israel's war mongering against Iran's nuclear facilities and its advocacy of full-spectrum sanctions ran head on with Indian preference to seek diplomatic solutions and engage economically. India's eventual agreement to the imposition of sanctions on Iran, in addition to being a product of multiple pulls and pressures, American pressure being one but also perhaps responding partially to Israeli sensitivities about nuclear proliferation¹⁸.

Israel's regional isolation and minimal external capabilities have constrained its ability to shape India-Iran ties in any significant way. Whereas the U.S. would have positive conditions it could grant India to get their cooperation on Iran's policy. Israel, with its small economy and minimal global pull would be leaning mostly toward negative over India rather than incorporating significant quid pro quo. This has hampered the ability of Israel to curb India-Iran cooperation. New dynamics in the India-Iran relationship have been emerging since 2020, with the Abraham Accords and Israel normalising relations with a number of Arab states.

Israel's strengthened regional posture has also given it more flexibility to create partnerships as part of a coalition against Iranian influence, and done away with some of its earlier isolation that meant it was dependent on relations with countries like India. These changes also brought India's balancing act between Israel and Iran into options opened up and challenges faced by the world's largest

democratic country. Israeli concerns about Iranian activities in Syria and Lebanon, along with other regional arenas, have coincided at times with global alarm about Iranian behavior in the region, creating multilateral pressure on countries like India to limit their business with Iran. But India's lack of direct engagement with security issues in the Middle East has meant that such pressures have been less successful than it has been when Indian interests were more immediate.

The launch of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) at the G20 summit in 2023 has opened new avenues for India-Israel ties, within a regional context with implications for India-Iran relations. This overland corridor connects India with Europe through the Middle East, but bypasses Iran and provides an alternative routes going via Iran, thus minimising dependence on Iranian cooperation for regional connectivity. In the context of India-Israel relations, technology cooperation has gained an expanded role and implications for India-Iran connection. Dependence on Israeli know-how in cybersecurity, defence technologies and space capabilities has formed parts of this superior-inferior dynamic which may get conditioned by India's Iran policy. Most of the collaboration is commercial, making it easier to shield from political considerations over Iran.

In sum up, Israel has been an important but not a decisive factor on the course of India-Iran relationship. Israeli interests and relationship may have placed limitations on some aspects of cooperation between India and Iran, but they never prevented the sustenance of basic bilateral relations or partnerships in fields where Indian concerns are directly involved. Israel's affect was strongest when co-ordinated with other external actors, especially the US, rather than on itself.

Involvement of Pakistan and Regional Complications

Pakistan's role as a spoiler in India-Iran relations has been a source of notable disruption, characterised by ongoing attempts to block or undermine collaboration between the two countries whenever such collaboration could serve to expand India's regional influence or strategic advantage. Having served as the former's principal regional adversary and security challenge, Pakistan has had a motive and capacity to act against India's engagement with Iran using a combination of its strategic alliances, proxy operations, and diplomatic pressure to curtail Indo-Iranian collaboration. The existential nature of the India-Pakistan competition, therefore, has meant that any step forward in enhancing India's strategic hold or its regional heft would always been considered by Pakistan as a threat to Pakistani interests. Pakistan has viewed India's policy of engagement with Iran, especially in terms of connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia as a potential threat to its strategic importance while providing an alternative to the Pakistani-controlled routes and relationships. This has yielded continued Pakistani attempts to either obstruct or complicate India-Iran initiatives¹⁹.

Pakistan's partnerships with great power have given it some leverage to weight on India-Iran relations indirectly. Pakistan's close relationship to Saudi Arabia based on common Sunni identity and strategic collaboration, has allowed Islamabad to induce Riyadh to pressure Iran as well as other countries into restricting their ties with Tehran. Pakistan's own Cold War era strategic partnership with the USA and later within context of war on terror also became avenues to persuade US pressure towards India from another side for its ties with Iran. The evolution of Pak-China strategic collaboration, formalized by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, has enabled Pakistan to raise its ability to muddy India-Iran bonhomie by various means. Chinese investment in Pakistani infrastructure including Gwadar port has waged direct competition with India's projects within Iran such as Chahbahar port. Pakistan's capacity to provide China

with an alternate routes to the Arabian Sea has diminished Chinese appetite for people-to-people connectivity projects, such as those linking India through Iran but potentially undermining Pakistani strategic interests. Afghanistan has provided the primary battleground for Pak interference in India's Iran relations with most far-reaching consequences. Afghanistan has ever served as "strategic depth inside Pakistan, to deny India's foothold in Afghanistan. With India and Iran having mutual interests in the upstate of Afghan their combined role was seen by Pakistan as a serious challenge to her regional position. Pakistan's support to a number of Afghan militant outfits, including the Taliban, has generated security dilemmas for India and also Iran in Afghanistan. What seems to have stopped Indian-Iran tandem efforts is that the Taliban, with its ideological aversion to Iran's Shia government and Pakistani control over the movement and successive Afghan governments (both under President Hamid Karzai and his successor Ashraf Ghani), has ensured that moments of Taliban impunity translated into limits on India-Iran cooperation in rule-torn Afghanistan. The Pakistani intelligence apparatus has also been reported to have sponsored attacks on Indian presence in Afghanistan, potentially raising further security concerns for India's outreach to Iran²⁰.

The problem of cross-border terrorism has provided both chances and constraints for India-Iran partnership, with Pakistan being the main actor in each. India and Iran both have been threatened by terrorist groups which organise or are supported from Pakistan, encouraging cooperation in terrorism-related operations. But Pakistan's efforts to draw distinctions among terrorist groups backing some, opposing others have muddled counter terrorism work in the region and hobbled India-Iran security cooperation. Pakistan's nuclear-weaponization has further complicated relations between India and Iran, as it has skewed the regional power balance in South Asia, and influenced global perspectives regarding non-proliferation. For example, the development of

Pakistani nuclear weapons has improved Pakistan's strategic position vis-a-vis India and raised proliferation concerns which color international perceptions of Iran's nuclear program. Pakistan's history of nuclear proliferation, including the A.Q. Khan network's help for Iran has put connections between Pakistani and Iranian nuclear issues in place that further cloud India's stance on each. Economic competition has also been avenue through which Pakistan tries to restrict India-Iran cooperation. Pakistan's transit country strategy for regional trade and possible energy supplies crossing its territory from Iran to other customers in the future has yielded alternatives for India-Iran economic cooperation while giving Islamabad a lever against Iranian policy. The Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline rendered infeasible and later shelved by the multiple barriers was a clear example of how Pakistani control over transit corridors could cross Indian-Iranian economic relationships²¹.

Pakistan's diplomatic quest to isolate India globally been stretched to outrageous length of even restricting the cooperation between India and Iran. Pakistan's status as a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and its relationships with Muslim-majority countries have given it other outlets to express them, including over Indian policies that apply to Muslims or to Muslim communities and issues like India's relations with countries such as Iran. However these initiatives have mostly failed, as most nations have had realistic policies with regard to their relations with India and Iran. Also, the problem of Balochistan has caused India-Iran-Pakistan relations to take awkward turns, given that it is located in both Iran and Pakistan suffering periodic insurgencies with security complexes. Tensions have also been stirred by Pakistani allegations that India and Iran back Baluch separatists, while both India and Iran have sharply criticized Pakistan for its failure to prevent cross-border attacks from Pakistani Balochistan.

These reciprocal accusations have at times undermined India-Iran security cooperation in the region. India-Iran relations have also been shaped by Pakistani attempts to exploit sectarian differences, particularly issues involving the treatment of minority communities. Pakistan's efforts to present itself as a defender of Sunni Muslim interests abroad have occasionally put it at odds with Iran's role as a patron of Shia communities, adding pressures that influence regional stability and complicate India's ties with both nations. Indian attempts not to get entangled in a sectarian policy was often resisted by Pakistani attempts at communally instigating regional conflict.

Development of other regional constructs have enabled Pakistan as a new tools to influence India-Iran relations. Pakistan involvement in regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and relations with states including Turkey and Saudi Arabia have multiplied the number of fronts on which diplomatic pressure can be exerted over India. Yet, Iranian involvement in these constructs has sometimes hindered Pakistani influence and facilitated the scope for direct Iran-Pakistan dialogues that are not hampered by Indian objections.

Recent events and circumstances, such as the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in 2021, have brought new dynamics into Pakistani influence over India-Iran relations. While Pakistan's strategic goals vis-à-vis Afghanistan have been largely achieved, the economic and humanitarian calamity that is taking hold in Afghanistan has introduced new challenges which demand regional cooperation, offering potential reasons for a reduced Pakistani opposition to India-Iran engagement. Given the Pakistan's enduring fear of Indian influence in Afghanistan, there are reasons to believe that core constraints are live on. The role of Pakistan as spoiler in India-Iran relations, throughout this period, and quite substantive, if not successful either. Pakistani meddling has definitely hindered bilateral relations and precluded the full flourishing of India-Iran potential, but it hasn't managed to shut down all cooperation or isolate India from having a basic

diplomatic relationship with Iran. Pakistan has succeeded best when its leverage is part of a broader multilateral or regional strategy such as in Afghanistan and in geographical areas where country's have significant equities.

Afghanistan: A Proxy War on a Level Playing Field

Afghanistan's external dimension in India-Iran agreements have been many layered as well as evolving, acting both as the 'common ground' for cooperation between the New Delhi and Tehran on one hand, to being a source of additional complications brought by other actors Afghanistan has been an opportunity as well as a challenge for India-Iran strategic partnership since 1991, and the track record of Afghanistan has determined the nature of broader cooperation between them. Afghanistan in 1989 witnessed Soviet threat, and the country was plunged into civil war, which led to a vacuum of power that many regional and international players sought to fill out for their own interests. Both for India and Iran, Afghanistan was an important buffer whose stability and alignment would have a significant impact on their security environments. This resulted in an influx of different mujahideen groups and later the Taliban, generating intricate dynamics that brought India and Iran together while producing new sources of competition. India and Iran had a basis for cooperating in their shared hostility to the Taliban, which ruled most of Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. Both countries backed the Northern Alliance, a coalition of mainly non-Pashtun groups that controlled northern Afghanistan and were opposed to Taliban rule. This collaboration was one of the most remarkable cases of India-Iran strategic cooperation in the 1990s, included intelligence sharing, military aid and diplomatic backing to anti-Taliban forces.²²

The common hostility towards the Taliban was rooted in several reasons, and both India and Iran's interests coincided. Both countries opposed the Taliban's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and its potential influence over their own Muslim populations. Iran had particular interest in the Taliban's treatment of

Afghan Shia communities, as a predominantly Shia nation, and its strong association with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. India saw the Taliban as a Pakistani surrogate that would expand Islamabad's orbit of influence and serve as a sanctuary for terrorist groups opposed to India. But collaboration on Afghanistan also made things complicated on India-Iran ties, because an array of other external players were involved. Russian backing for the Northern Alliance opened possibilities for trilateral cooperation, it also meant that India-Iran cooperation in Afghanistan was subservient to Russian interests and strategies. China's modest engagement in the 1990s deepened on competitive dynamics emerged as Beijing developed its own ties to a range of Afghan factional actors. The Afghanistan Policy of India and its evolving Dynamics with Iran have changed in the wake of the September 11 attacks and American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Despite their common interest in the overthrow of the Taliban regime, India and Iran witnessed a large-scale U.S. military presence and reconstruction, as well as international oversight over new Afghan governance structures to impose some limitations on cooperation possibilities between New Delhi and Tehran.

India's reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan, more than \$3 billion since 2001, has been one of the most "striking" aspects of its policy towards that country and seems largely in line with Iranian interest in maintaining stability there, and aiding development. Various Indian funded projects such as construction of the Afghanistan Parliament building, roads and educational campaigns have helped to increase Afghanistan's ties with South Asia at the expense of Pakistan. Iran has overall favoured such projects as they would stabilize the region and diminish Afghan reliance on Pakistan²³.

India and Iran have clearly associated the expansion of Chabahar port in Iran with Afghanistan policy, even as this multi-modal transport project would give Afghanistan access to global markets outside of Pakistani territory. This route has

been considered as a positive initiative for Afghan economic growth and Indian strategic goals in diminishing Pakistani influence over Afghan commerce. Support for this project has been extended by Iran, which views participation in the pipeline as maintaining its status as a transit hub and friendship with India. Yet, Afghanistan has also presented complications in India-Iran ties because of conflicting agendas and competing interactions with its different Afghan interlocutors. Iran's neighbouring proximity with Afghanistan and large Tajik and Hazara population means that Tehran has had a different set of levers and concerns compared to India's involvement, yet distant but economically invested involvement. These differences have sometimes meant different policy approaches to Afghanistan's political developments and varying contacts with the various competing Afghan factions. The Afghan refugee problem has offered an opportunity and a challenge for India-Iran cooperation. Iran has taken in millions of Afghan refugees over the years, and social and economic pressures from their presence have influenced Iranian domestic politics and regional policies. India's lesser engagement in refugee problems has made it less susceptible to such pressures and hence less influential in tackling the humanitarian dimension of the Afghan crisis. India-Iran joint cooperation on refugee and humanitarian matters have not been very strong, failing to benefit from the potential for enhanced collaboration. Drug trafficking out of Afghanistan has been another cause of friction in India-Iran relations, both are transit nations for Afghan opium and heroin that is smuggled to international markets. Iran has suffered significantly in fighting drug trafficking, with real costs on security forces and border facilities. India's collaboration on counternarcotics has been sparse, in part because of the geographic distance and more so because of divergent law enforcement priorities and capabilities.²⁴

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's retaking of power in August 2021 has introduced new dynamics into the space for India-Iran

cooperation in Afghanistan which is still unfolding. Both countries have adopted cautious stances toward the new Taliban government, keeping in touch diplomatically without extending formal recognition. This common hesitation has presented a chance for coordination, but also suggests the confusion about what Afghanistan will look like in the future and how the world should respond.²⁵

International sanctions and the humanitarian crisis created after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan has made economic cooperation difficult. Both India and Iran have been confronted with tough choices about whether to continue providing development assistance and maintaining economic ties with Afghanistan without legitimizing the Taliban government or running a foul of international sanctions. This is unsurprising given the complexity of this issue and the absence of established channels for bilateral coordination on Afghanistan in India-Iran relations. The larger geopolitics of Afghanistan has always influenced India-Iran cooperation in the troubled areas. American, Pakistani, Chinese and Russian interests in Afghanistan have also shaped the potential and limitations of India-Iran ties. India-Iran collaboration in Afghanistan, however, has never been able to take place outside the calculus of larger regional and global dynamics primarily because several external forces with different ends were at play.

Humanitarian issues in Afghanistan have created fresh opportunities for India-Iran cooperation, especially with regard to helping the weak and the needy there as well as sustaining essential services. Both countries have expressed sympathy for the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and offered aid of various kinds. But so far any joint action has been small-scale: in part restricted by international sanctions regimes, in part hampered by the absence of precedents to guide bilateral discussions on humanitarian matters.

Afghanistan has been the axis of strategic cooperation between India and Iran as well as a theatre of problems and issues. India-Iran cooperation has been

constrained by the instability in that country and involvement of third parties, but there have been enduring incentives for engagement. The future course of events in Afghanistan will most probably remain a key determinant as to the overall extent and effectiveness of India-Iran ties.²⁶

The Role of Multilateral Institutions

The multilateral dimension of India-Iran relations has indeed generated critical templates for bilateral engagement, often coupled with further complicating components thrown up by other third-party actors and the competition in institutional priorities. Both have employed a range of regional and global multilateral organizations since 1991, in order to promote their bilateral relationship, co-ordinate policies on shared concerns, and minimize differences that could exacerbate bilateral tensions. Yet multilateral participation is also limited by external factors the influence of other member states, and how sanctions regimes affect institutional participation. SCO has become one of the most important multilateral mechanisms for India-Iran interaction, offering an alternative platform for regional collaboration that has room to maneuver outside Western-dominated institutional arrangements. India's observer status in SCO in October, 2005 and full membership in June, 2017 along with Iran's observer status in April, 2005, towards full membership by 2023 can provide for regular diplomatic engagement and policy coordination on regional security and economic matters.

India and Iran have come closer on a number of issues under the SCO including resistance to foreign military intervention, multi-lateral mechanisms in resolving regional conflicts and greater economic integration among member states. The organization's priority for counterterrorism, energy cooperation and connectivity projects converges with the bilateral interests of both countries as well as provide platforms for pragmatic collaboration. However, China and Russia's control over the SCO also implied that India-Iran collaboration within this organization would

be conditional on these great powers' interests and strategic calculus. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) offered a significant multilateral basis to India-Iran coordination as it drew from both countries' legacies of non-alignment and their joint struggle against hegemonic diktats. India's historic role in NAM and Iran's active engagement opened up possibilities of diplomatic coordination on the contemporary international agenda ranging from condemnations of unilateral sanctions, to advancing the cause for a reformed world order and defending the interests of developing countries. In recent decades, however, the NAM has suffered from a loss of relevance in world affairs that has hampered this framework for strengthening bilateral relations. Multilateral energy-centred initiatives have created specific platforms for India-Iran cooperation in sectors of special bilateral interest. The International Energy Forum (IEF), the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) and regional energy organizations have set up frameworks for policy coordination and technical exchanges. Sanctions constraints have restricted Iran's involvement in numerous multilateral energy-related initiatives, though these are an increasingly significant source of potential multidimensional co-operation²⁷.

The UN forum has cast both opportunities and challenges for India-Iran multilateral partnership. Both countries have broadly backed UN-based solutions to global disputes and voiced support for reforming the Security Council to give greater say to the developing world. Yet sanctions through the UN system have introduced limits on bilateral cooperation and led both countries to weigh their multilateral obligations against national relationship imperatives. Regional economic organisations such as the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) have provided frameworks for co-operation between India and Iran, restricted up sanctions-related constraints and overlapping institutional memberships. The Economic Cooperation Organisation, having Iran as a founding member, is an initiative that offers opportunities for regional economic integration which could

further prosper Indo-Iranian trade relations. Yet being an observing country and not a full member in ECO has restricted India's interaction with ECO mechanisms. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperations (OIC) has thrown a spanner for India-Iran multilateral activities, with India's exclusion from OIC despite the country having one of the largest Muslim populations in the world and Iran's participation being at times limited by political disputes with some members principally Saudi Arabia. The OIC's stance on several regional conflicts, its handling of India-Pakistan disputes is stoking the friction that impacts a broader Indian multilateral correlation with Iran.

The Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) as a regional organisation has served as a platform for India's engagement with alternate global governance mechanisms, but given that Iran is not a member, it constrained the possibilities of direct multilateral cooperation under this framework. But, BRICS stances on a range of global issues to which BRICS's opposition has been in line with Iranian preferences, such as unilateral sanctions or multipolarity, have indirectly worked out to be supportive of policies that benefit India-Iran relationships.

Platforms such as the Group of 77 (G-77) and other coalitions of developing countries have enabled India to coordinate with Iran on global economic issues and issues related to development. The two countries have emphasised for overhauled international economic systems, increased development aid and technology transfer to the developing world. This process of bonding helped to develop more comprehensive diplomatic long-term relationships that will complement bilateral relations through pursuing common interests in multilateral processes. Multilateral nuclear issues, in particular, have been an obstacle to Indo-Iranian cooperation, given Iran's differences with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as well as multiple international sanctions regimes.

New Delhi's predicament as a nuclear non-proliferation outsider has made it difficult for India to fully support Iranian positions, even as it is India's bilateral relationship with Iran may have limited the extent of any criticism of international pressure on Iran's nuclear program. Climate change and multilateral environment also appear as new areas for possible India-Iran collaboration; both countries face environmental vulnerabilities, while sharing interests in gaining access to green technology and climate finance. Yet, because of sanctions regime constraints Iran has been restricted in participation in many climate-related initiatives and both countries ongoing reliance on exporting fossil fuels cross-cut some environmental multilateral processes.²⁸

Multilateral trade organisations have also offered potential frameworks for economic cooperation between India and Iran although engagement with such bodies has again been complicated by sanctions regimes as well as varying degrees of integration into global trading networks. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has established the framework for both countries have agreed to be bound by, but Iran's membership is stalled for political reasons and both have sought changes in new WTO rules that would better serve developing countries. Regional security groupings have provided forums for India-Iran collaboration on shared security challenges, particularly with respect to Afghanistan and counter-terrorism. But such cooperation has been constrained by the involvement of other regional players with differing threat perceptions, such as Pakistan, general geopolitical issues that impact on efforts to develop regional security cooperation mechanism.

The role of the agencies of international organisation for India-Iran collaboration such as UNESCO programmes, academic exchanges or cultural preservation projects plays a crucial in enhancing the bilateral relations. Multilateral mechanisms have offered an access to engagement that would be difficult to sustain in face of bilateral pressure, they also enabled policy

coordination and practical cooperation. Yet, the efficacy of multilateral cooperation has long been impeded by the involvement of other players with competing agendas, the implications of sanctions regimes on institutional participation and the broader geopolitical framework that affects regional and global arrangements for governance.

The history of multilateral partnership between India and Iran mirrors the larger transformations in global governance, new institutional formats that contest Western primacy. India and Iran seeks increased strategic autonomy and less reliance on Western-dominated institutions, engagement in multilateralism became more about collaboration toward achieving national interests, while at the same time participating in a reconfiguring of global governance processes.

Indo-Iran's bilateral relations since 1991, emerged as a complicated phenomenon surrounded by unparalleled pressures and challenges. The role of the US, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Pakistan and Afghanistan on the bilateral relations between India and Iran has pull and pressure to materialised their foreign policy objective under the larger global matrix of international relations where middle powers are acutely conscious of balancing pressures to appease great powers along with advancing their own national interest and strategic compulsions.²⁹

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Chapter VI

Challenges to India-Iran Bilateral Relations

India and Iran have a relationship that spans thousands of years, characterised by deep cultural and economic connections. Iranian officials and scholars frequently emphasise the historical and civilizational bonds between the two nations as a fundamental basis for collaboration. Language and culture play significant roles in enhancing the ties between India and Iran. Both countries engage in a broad range of bilateral topics, such as energy security, strengthening cultural and strategic relations, and combating terrorism. The establishment of contemporary diplomatic relations was marked by the signing of the 'Treaty of Friendship' in 1950, which advocated for "perpetual peace and friendship." Throughout the Cold War era, India-Iran relations were influenced by differing ideological stances. At that time, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran aligned with the American-led bloc while also being a member of the Baghdad Pact, which fostered close relations with Pakistan. In contrast, Indian Prime Minister Pandit Nehru was a proponent of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Furthermore, during the Indo-Pak wars in 1965 and 1971, Iran extended both diplomatic support and material assistance to Pakistan¹. Iran has consistently maintained its oil supply to India, demonstrating its commitment.

The Cold War, India and Iran strengthened their ties, driven by shared security concerns and the rise of Pan Americana in the West Asian region. The 1990s marked a period of enhanced relations between the two nations due to several key factors. Both countries prioritised establishing a long-term collaboration in the energy sector. Both countries advocated for a peaceful resolution to the situation in Afghanistan, aiming to create an inclusive government that represented all ethnicities. Their mutual apprehensions regarding security and economic activities in Central Asia also played a significant role in fostering closer

relations. The Taliban's ascendance in Afghanistan during this decade raised alarms for both India and Iran, as did the shared challenge posed by increasing Islamic fundamentalism emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Consequently, during this post-Cold War period, both nations acknowledged the importance of broadening their relationship rather than allowing divergent positions on issues like Kashmir to dominate their interactions. This realisation led to improvements in bilateral relations and initiated a series of high-level state visits between prominent officials from both countries.

A new chapter commenced at the outset of the post-Cold War era when India's then-Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Iran after its Islamic Revolution, followed by a reciprocal visit from Iran's then-President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to India. The creation of the "Indo-Iran Joint Commission" in 1993 established an institutional framework aimed at steering bilateral economic relations at the level of foreign ministers. In April 2001, India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee undertook a four-day visit to Iran, which was characterised by Iranian President Muhammad Khatami as "a new chapter in human and international relations"². During this visit, the Tehran Declaration was established, outlining a framework for bilateral collaboration in several key sectors, such as energy, transportation and transit, industry, agriculture, and services. It also aimed to enhance scientific and technological partnerships through initiatives like joint research projects, training programs (both short- and long-term), and the regular exchange of relevant information. Consequently, the Tehran Declaration served to expedite cooperation between India and Iran across various strategic matters, including defence relations. Additionally, both nations formalised four agreements concerning information technology, professional and technical training, trade and economic collaboration, as well as customs cooperation³. The first meeting of the Indo-Iran Strategic Dialogue took place in

October 2001, concentrating on three key areas of shared interest: regional and global security outlooks, the defence strategies of both India and Iran, and matters about the international disarmament agenda⁴.

India and Iran have had a long-standing connection characterised by robust socio-cultural and commercial ties dating back to ancient times. Nonetheless, the rise of both regional and global powers has significantly altered the dynamics of their relationship, shifting it from a bilateral framework to one that is more regionally oriented. India encounters several challenges in its approach to Iran, as Iran has often shown indifference to various issues that are crucial for India⁵.

US factors in India- Iran Bilateral Relations

India-Iran bilateral relations have been facing several challenges ever since the United States imposed sanctions on Iran after pulling out from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. The energy partnership between India and Iran has yet to be reestablished, even though Indian refineries are eager to buy oil from Iran. The main barrier to reviving energy collaboration between the two nations is the ongoing U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran⁶.

In a recent initiative aimed at intensifying efforts against organisations facilitating Iran's oil trade, the United States enacted sanctions on multiple trading firms. The economic restrictions imposed by the U.S. on Iran present considerable obstacles. Consequently, India has had to reduce its oil imports while managing its relationships with both the United States and Israel. Effectively navigating these sanctions demands skilled diplomatic engagement⁷.

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, which saw the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of an Islamic government under Ayatollah Khomeini, coupled with the hostage crisis involving 52 American hostages at the US embassy in Tehran, Iran has struggled to fully capitalise on its energy resources. The United States significantly influenced Iran's ability to exploit its energy assets. Following the Iranian revolution, the US imposed a ban on all its companies from engaging in trade with Iran. This created an opportunity for competing firms from other nations to enter the market. In August 1996, the United States Congress enacted the "Iran Libya Sanctions Act" (ILSA), which subsequently became referred to as the "Iran Sanctions Act" (ISA). This legislation enabled the U.S. to exert pressure on foreign companies to refrain from engaging in trade with Iran.

Under the ISA, the United States ensured that no foreign investments exceeding US\$20 million annually were made in Iran's energy sector. This American pressure significantly diminished the likelihood of foreign investment in this sector. Additionally, the US froze all Iranian assets and prohibited international financial institutions from providing loans to Iran. At a time when Iran was still attempting to recover from nearly a decade of conflict with Iraq, managing this predicament proved exceedingly challenging. In response to the withdrawal of international oil companies, the Iranian government opted to involve the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in overseeing its oil sector, appointing Brigadier General Rostam Ghasemi, commander of the IRGC's construction unit, for this purpose. This action was intended to convey a clear message to the global community that Iran was capable of handling its own affairs without reliance on external support. Interestingly, despite these sanctions aimed at hindering Iran's energy trade, its oil exports were not subjected to sanctions until 2011. This may have been influenced by international oil prices that directly affected the economies of both the US and various European nations⁸. Following the release

of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report, which claimed that Iran was clandestinely pursuing nuclear weapons development, the United States expanded its sanctions to encompass not only Iran's petrochemical industry but also its entire banking sector. Furthermore, countries involved in trading refined petroleum products with Iran also faced sanctions⁹.

This pressure prompted nations such as India and China to engage in barter trade with Iran as a strategy to circumvent sanctions, although this approach fell short of fulfilling the required payments for oil imports. The influence of the United States and its sanctions significantly impacted India's diplomatic ties with Iran. Furthermore, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US solidified its status as the only superpower. In light of this new dynamic, India had to adapt and swiftly sought to improve relations with the US, as both New Delhi and Washington identified shared interests.

Other considerations involve India's ambition to take on a more significant role in international matters. In this regard, the United States could assist by endorsing India's pursuit of permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Additionally, the establishment of a civil nuclear agreement between the two nations illustrates how the US can align with India's interests. Consequently, India cannot overlook its relationship with the US while engaging with Iran. Notably, during the negotiations of the civil nuclear agreement, the US consistently suggested that India's strong ties with Iran might adversely affect the outcome of the deal.

In 2005, when the Indian Foreign Minister, K Natwar Singh, went to Tehran, the Bush administration did not hesitate to warn India that its failure to cooperate

with the US on Iran could have negative implications for the civil nuclear agreement¹⁰.

In 2006, India's decision to oppose Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regarding its purported nuclear program marked a significant downturn in their bilateral relations. This occurred shortly after India and the United States finalised an agreement concerning civil nuclear cooperation. It was generally believed that India made this move under pressure from the US. Although India had previously been hesitant about the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline initiative, following India's vote against Iran, Tehran also reconsidered its endorsement of the agreement, citing disagreements regarding LNG pricing. The Supreme Economic Council called for a renegotiation of the price. In December 2010, the Reserve Bank of India ceased the currency swap mechanism of the Asian Clearing Union (ACU) due to pressure from the United States. As a consequence, around US\$5 billion that Indian oil companies owed to Iran for previously acquired crude oil became frozen. Ultimately, Iran issued a warning that it would terminate all contracts with India if these payments were not processed¹¹.

Recent years have witnessed the expansion of economic relations and the deepening of the strategic partnership between India and the US. Under the Donald Trump era (2017-21), there was also a simultaneous increase in the confrontation between Washington and Tehran. These and other factors have affected India-Iran relations in a number of ways.

India sought to mitigate the negative impact on its relationship with Iran following the United States' withdrawal from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan

of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 and the subsequent reinstatement of sanctions against Iran. However, India's reduced involvement in the Chabahar port initiative in southeastern Iran, along with its removal from the Chabahar-Zahedan railway project, significantly weakened bilateral ties and resulted in criticism directed at India within Iran. New Delhi's further concern increased with the signing of the 25-year Iran-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in March this year. The roadmap looks to exponentially develop political, economic and strategic relations between Tehran and Beijing¹².

Challenges of Regional Geopolitics in India-Iran Relations

Iran's strained relations with the United States, coupled with its stance on regional conflicts, such as its strategic alliance with China and support for militias throughout West Asia, add complexity to India's diplomatic considerations.

It appears that Iran and Pakistan are moving towards a more balanced and collaborative relationship than has previously existed. With the potential diminishment of Pakistan's significance in alignment with U.S. interests, especially given the recent outreach to Iran and the reduction of forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan may find it strategically unwise to provoke an Iran that is likely to enhance its geopolitical influence. In fact, Pakistan's warming ties with Iran stem from a carefully considered approach. To uphold a neutral stance in the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Islamabad has chosen to withdraw from the regional sectarian disputes. The pursuit of stability in Afghanistan has emerged as a common interest for both countries: Iran has expressed support for peace initiatives in Afghanistan, while Pakistan has taken on the role of mediator. Both nations view the threat from the Islamic State as a shared concern. During his visit to Pakistan in August, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif encouraged

Islamabad to work together in addressing issues related to sectarianism, terrorism, and extremism. As a result, both countries are motivated to avoid any revival of previous hostilities, understanding that neither benefits from such conflict.

China's energy requirements have emerged as a crucial economic support for Iran, underscoring the strengthening bilateral relations. Approximately 50% of Iran's crude oil exports are directed towards China, which in turn depends on Iranian supplies for about 10% of its total foreign energy imports. The expanding energy collaboration between Tehran and Beijing has fostered a more profound strategic partnership.

Given that China has contentious borders with India, realists would argue that the risk of conflict over regional influence in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Central Asia remains significant. This tension remains as long as China maintains its involvement in India's northeastern areas and Kashmir, either directly or indirectly, by using Pakistan as a counterbalance to India. Additionally, the conflicting energy demands of both nations could intensify competition, resulting in heightened rivalry over resource access in energy-rich countries.

As a net exporter of energy, Iran aims to leverage its resources to enhance its influence with India, Pakistan, and China while avoiding entanglement in their bilateral disputes. The robust strategic relationship between Pakistan and China is well acknowledged.

Pakistan represents a significant and expanding energy market, whereas China is even more prominent in scale. In anticipation of the removal of sanctions on Iran, China has revitalised the Iran-Pakistan pipeline initiative. In April 2015, an

agreement was established between Beijing and Islamabad to build a pipeline that will connect Gwadar port in Pakistan to Nawabshah. This pipeline is anticipated to transport gas from Iran's South Pars field, which is expected to produce around 4,500 MW of electricity, sufficient to meet Pakistan's existing power generation shortfalls.

The partnership in the energy sector between Iran and Pakistan aims to reduce the historical mistrust that has often separated the Shia-majority Iran from its predominantly Sunni neighbour, Pakistan. These energy projects are anticipated to not only help mitigate Pakistan's critical energy shortages but also provide a source of foreign currency for Iran's ailing economy. Iran has successfully finished its portion of the pipeline reaching the Pakistani border, whereas Pakistan intends to complete the remaining 80 kilometres from Gwadar to the Iranian border once sanctions on Tehran are formally removed.

China's approach appears strategically designed. Beijing holds a positive outlook on the IP pipeline due to its important geopolitical significance. This pipeline is expected to be a vital component of China's expansive Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road (OBOR) initiatives. The agreement for the IP pipeline is included within a broader \$46 billion infrastructure investment aimed at creating the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is being funded and built by China. The CPEC seeks to enhance critical infrastructure that could foster economic development, stretching from Gwadar Port located on Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast to Kashgar city in Xinjiang province, which serves as one of the primary launch points for China's OBOR strategy. Iran has shown interest in extending this gas pipeline through Pakistan into China. These developments prompt speculation regarding India's potential readiness to ease its resistance to CPEC, particularly as regions like Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir continue to face violence from militants operating from Pakistan¹³.

China, recognized as a significant regional power in East Asia and on the global stage, is enhancing its influence and garnering partnerships with various nations across multiple sectors. Since 2013, the Chinese government has been officially advocating for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Iran and India have adopted markedly different stances towards this initiative. India continues to regard the project as a potential threat to its stability and security, whereas Iran is keen to strengthen its relationship with China as a means of alleviating its economic isolation. This research aims to explore how Iran and India might advance their economic interests through collaborative efforts on BRI-related projects. The findings suggest that fostering multilateral cooperation in areas such as Chabahar port, the Chabahar free trade zone, and the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) could yield significant benefits for all involved parties. Nonetheless, it is essential to enhance collaboration conditions by simultaneously addressing security and development concerns, promoting economic integration, bolstering multilateral negotiations, upgrading infrastructure, and establishing payment mechanisms that do not rely on the dollar¹⁴.

Challenges in Economic Collaboration between India and Iran

Despite the possibilities for collaboration between Iran and India, particularly in areas such as energy economics and regional connectivity, several challenges hinder their partnership. These challenges can be categorized into external and internal factors.

The strong ties between India and the United States have intensified in response to China's ascent. Both nations share concerns regarding China's expanding influence both regionally and globally. Conversely, the United States has consistently sought to politically and economically isolate Iran. Although these

efforts date back several decades, they peaked during the Trump administration with the implementation of the "Maximum Pressure" campaign. Consequently, India faces a strategic dilemma: adhere to sanctions against Iran or maintain its cooperative stance with its neighbor. The enforcement of economic sanctions on Iran has significantly curtailed investment opportunities and other forms of economic engagement between the two countries.

China, being India's most significant and powerful neighbor, further complicates Iran-India relations. While India is apprehensive about the potential emergence of a new geopolitical landscape led by China in the region, it is acutely aware of the repercussions that could arise from not collaborating with an economy that is flourishing nearby. To counterbalance China's influence, India aims to leverage its relationship with Iran through various means, including investments in Chabahar port, diverse economic sectors, and railway network expansions. By establishing a north-south corridor that connects to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Europe via Iran, India seeks to mitigate perceived encirclements by China and Pakistan¹⁵.

This strategy of enhancing connectivity occasionally aligns with U.S. objectives aimed at balancing power within the region while attempting to isolate both China and Iran; at other times, it leads to conflict between these interests. The experience gained from sanctions has played a crucial role in shaping future foreign relations for Iran when comparing how China and India respond under similar pressures. As U.S. pressure on Iran increases, so does Tehran's inclination to foster closer ties with China. Simultaneously, growing distrust between China and India propels India toward deeper alignment with the United States—creating a cycle that distances both Iran and India further apart.

However, barriers to economic cooperation between Iran and India are not solely influenced by their relations with external powers. Beyond energy resources, a significant portion of trade between both nations consists of raw materials and non-capital goods. Additionally, both countries rely on imports of advanced industrial machinery and capital goods while India's economy is heavily service-oriented with limited interchangeability in tradeable goods. Furthermore, both nations contend with inadequate infrastructure and slow railway systems that hinder efficient large-scale transit operations.

In terms of railway network expansion, India possesses the fourth-largest railroad system in the world, spanning more than 63,974 route km. This extensive network provides a significant advantage for commercial transportation. Additionally, both India and Iran are focused on enhancing their economic corridors and maritime transport infrastructure. Key initiatives for both nations include modernization efforts, port and railway redevelopment, as well as improving safety measures and the efficiency of rapid transportation systems to boost their economic capabilities and increase transit capacity. From April 2000 to March 2020, India successfully attracted foreign direct investment (FDI) amounting to US\$1.64 billion, specifically in the port construction and development sector. In contrast, Iran has struggled to secure similar investments largely due to ongoing sanctions. This situation has created a pressing need for Iran to invest in its outdated and inefficient infrastructure, presenting a significant opportunity for India to engage actively in this endeavour¹⁶.

India's options in this scenario

New Delhi has paid increasing attention to its strategic position in recent decades, and economic cooperation with energy-rich Iran has thus become increasingly important to it.

India also seeks to strike a balance between other powers and play a key international role. Therefore, it seeks strong links with Iran as an influential regional power. In this context, New Delhi has, despite the many challenges, always tried to maintain relations with Tehran¹⁷.

In essence, India does not want to lose an important strategic partner in the Persian Gulf, nor does Tehran want to abandon the option of one day being able to expand relations with India. With the change of government in the US earlier this year and the upcoming resumption of the JCPOA talks in Vienna, there may be an amended or new nuclear agreement between Iran and world powers. This would, in turn, likely impact India-Iran relations, and especially if US extraterritorial sanctions are lifted.

On the other hand, with Pakistan welcoming an expansion of China-Iran relations, the risk of Beijing's greater presence and investment in Iran's infrastructure has raised concerns in New Delhi. Also, in light of India's great need for energy imports to fuel its economy, Iran's vast natural gas and oil resources remain important to India. Therefore, finding a way to reduce the US sanctions against Iran is important for both Tehran and New Delhi.

India's capacity to compete with China in terms of investment and infrastructure could be another opportunity for New Delhi to improve its relations with Tehran.

Iran's geostrategic position is very important for New Delhi. India's trade with Central Asia and Eurasia could greatly expand via the International North-South Transport Corridor, which runs through Iranian territory. Moreover, by continuing its involvement in the Chabahar port project, India could counter Chinese investments in the rival Pakistani port of Gwadar, which is not far from the Iran-Pakistan border. Chabahar will constitute a bridge between India, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. It will reduce the time and cost of connecting Eurasia to the Indian Ocean, and improve India's links with Central Asia, in the process elevating India's economic and political role in Eurasia.

In another dimension, Pakistan has long used the tool of extremist Islam in places such as Kashmir and Afghanistan to put pressure on India. Therefore, maintaining relations with Tehran is important for India to be able to counter the role of Pakistani regional policies. In this regard, India seeks to increase cooperation with Iran on Afghanistan to realise its interests in that country, particularly after the US military withdrawal that was completed on 31st Aug¹⁸.

India has the potential to combine the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) with various regional initiatives, including the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and even the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC) that was suggested during the G20 summit in 2023. The port of Chabahar could serve as a maritime hub connecting IMEC to INSTC, thereby enhancing India's attractiveness in transcontinental logistics. To protect investments in Chabahar from bureaucratic obstacles, India might consider establishing a specialised task force. It would be beneficial for India to strengthen its interactions with countries involved in INSTC to ensure effective

logistical coordination. Furthermore, strategic communication efforts could be employed to articulate Chabahar's role in promoting stability to Western nations. Ultimately, India should also enhance its soft diplomacy initiatives, such as scholarships, training programs, and cultural exchanges with Iran, to foster stronger interpersonal connections¹⁹.

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Conclusion

Concluding Observations and Recommendations

India-Iran relations over the past three decades present an interesting bilateral dynamic defined by unrealised potential, enduring constraints and extraordinary flexibility. Both countries have faced considerable challenges, like sanctions by the international community and security issues in their neighbourhood or alternative strategic priorities, yet they have continued to prove their determination to build and consolidate ties. The friendship has grown on the firm grounds of history, culture and mutually beneficial strategic interests.

The strategic importance of Iran for India's foreign policy represents a compelling case study in pragmatic diplomacy, strategic patience, and how states manage conflicting priorities at a time when international relations are increasingly multi-polar. India and Iran have established a multi-faceted relationship over three decades of engagement that rises above ideological divides, underscoring the continuing importance of geography, economic complementarities and strategic convergence.

Iran holds a special and incomparable place within India's strategic framework. The relationship is a mechanism to achieve many strategic ends at the same time: energy security, regional connectivity, strategic autonomy and great power balancing. No other country gives India the broad base of geographical advantages, resource richness and strategic location as Iran does.

Energy security has been at the heart of relations, Iran being one of India's most reliable sources of oil and natural gas during India's historical energy scarcity. The deep energy logic will outlast the current sanctions-related disruptions, and future expansion of cooperation opportunities exists in both traditional and renewable energy fields.

The Chabahar Port initiative epitomises the largest strategic enterprise in India-Iran ties and symbolises India's larger idea of regional connectivity and its

aspirations for Indo-Pacific leadership. If the project managed to take off, India would have unparalleled access to Afghanistan and Central Asia - not to mention a counter-narrative for Chinese infrastructure projects in the region.

Regional security cooperation has helped form a basis for bilateral relations that goes beyond economic interests to include common threats and strategic goals. Collaboration in Afghanistan, fight against terrorism, and maritime security showed the real dividends of a strategic partnership and constituencies for continued engagement were developed in both countries.

India's quest for energy and connectivity has a natural symbiosis with the energy resources of Iran and its geographical location, whereas Iran's requirement for economic development and aspiration to be an influential regional leader is complemented by India's expanding economic power and technological prowess. But their relationship has also shed light on the challenges for middle powers in an altogether more complicated world. Offset by external constraints, the contest of great powers and regional security dilemmas has continuously circumscribed the space for cooperation and imposed a need for both to contrive creative yet imperfect solutions so that they can cooperate. The energy partnership that served as the hub of relations illustrates both the promise and limits of strategic partnerships when under sanction. There were still some co-operations that continued with alternative methods of payment and barter, but these could not bridge the efficiency gap and did not have the same economies of scale as regular commercial relationships.

The research indicates that trade between India and Iran has experienced growth over the years. The demand for oil in India has surged more rapidly due to its swift economic advancement. Factors such as Iran's nuclear program and Trump's inward-focused policies have influenced this dynamic. It is essential for India and Iran to work towards enhancing their bilateral relations. India can serve as a stable market for Iranian oil, while Iran can supply oil to India at competitive prices.

However, considering the existing trade deficit, India should aim to broaden its export portfolio by focusing on goods where it holds a comparative advantage to alleviate the trade imbalance. Additionally, diversifying oil imports is advisable. Therefore, under the current economic circumstances, the bilateral trade between these two nations holds substantial importance and presents mutually beneficial opportunities for both parties.

Over time, common cultural and civilizational interests have given the relations an important source of stability in chaotic times. India's policy of continuous cultural diplomacy, educational collaboration and people-to-people exchange has kept the emotional connect alive, which reflects in their bilateral relations. The cultural and civilisational aspects of the relationship provide the bedrock that extends beyond transient political hiccups and cements enduring constituencies for cooperation. These strong historical links, coupled with post-modern people-to-people engagements, are the guarantors of the India-Iran link surviving the ups and downs of political change.

India's soft power diplomacy with Iran, which values long-term relations, has a long-term vision over a short-term strategy in its interactions. That it has managed to keep both left and right mild in the wake of substantial challenges attests to the enduring utility of soft power as an instrument of statecraft. Nevertheless, the constraints experienced also serve to highlight the need for soft power approaches to be tempered with good strategic planning and a realistic appreciation of international limitations. While the two countries develop and evolve, and while we experience more transformation in the international system, Indo-Iran relations will remain an exciting case to consider when it comes to soft power diplomacy. Over time, common cultural and civilizational interests have given the relationship an important source of stability in chaotic times. India's policy of continuous cultural diplomacy, educational collaboration and people-to-people

exchange has kept the emotional connect alive, which reflects in bilateral relations.

The relationships between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of India are deeply rooted in history and have been moulded by various influences, including internal, regional, and global events. Notably, the impact of significant world powers on the current interactions between these nations is particularly prominent among the international elements.

India-Iran's bilateral relations since 1991, emerged as a complicated phenomenon surrounded by unparalleled pressures and challenges. The role of the US, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Pakistan and Afghanistan on the bilateral relations between India and Iran has pull and pressure to materialise their foreign policy objective under the larger global matrix of international relations, where middle powers are acutely conscious of balancing pressures to appease great powers along with advancing their own national interest and strategic compulsions.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has established a foundation for collaboration among Russia, Iran, and India. However, this cooperation within the Moscow-Tehran-New Delhi triangle encounters challenges stemming from both regional and global political and economic shifts. The relationship between India and Russia is influenced by international events, particularly Moscow's strained ties with Western nations. While India maintains amicable relations with both Iran and Russia, it remains a key strategic partner of the USA in South Asia. Although India has not fully adhered to Western sanctions imposed on Russia, it seeks to avoid escalating tensions with the West, particularly with the USA and the UK.

As Iran and India work to enhance their partnership through the INSTC framework, they face significant hurdles, notably stemming from unsuccessful negotiations aimed at reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The dynamics of Tehran-New Delhi relations are further complicated by concerns surrounding Iran's nuclear ambitions and its anti-US stance. Currently, Washington has exempted Chabahar Port from US sanctions. However, given the Taliban's control over Afghanistan and ongoing issues related to JCPOA discussions, there is a possibility that an embargo may soon be imposed on this port. Such developments would likely adversely affect the INSTC project moving forward.

In light of recent changes in the global energy market, both nations are encountering significant competition within the energy sector. Consequently, despite the positive outlook regarding their bilateral relations, notable challenges persist. This situation poses risks to collaborative initiatives like INSTC over time. Nevertheless, the strengthening of strategic ties between Tehran and Moscow, as well as between Moscow and New Delhi, is likely to elevate INSTC's function beyond merely serving as a transit corridor. The countries involved in this geopolitical endeavour appear intent on maximising their foreign and economic policy advantages. Apart from its logistical significance aligned with the geopolitical aspirations of these nations, INSTC provides additional crucial benefits. Given the strategic relevance of this initiative for various countries and international organisations, the rivalry among global and regional powers presents a new obstacle for the project.

The geopolitical factor has always been a significant obstacle in Iran-India relations. Even before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the two countries belonged to rival power blocs, and it still seems the future dynamics of their relations will be determined to some extent by geopolitical factors. Recent developments also show divergences in the two countries' approaches to regional and global issues. One of the factors that has always been detrimental to the Iran-India friendship is the United States' obsession with limiting Tehran's strategic autonomy. Since 2011, US sanctions have prevented the development of closer economic ties

between Iran and India. On the other hand, India, as a country with global aspirations and motivated to gain a seat at the global table, has been developing a robust strategic partnership with the US since 2014 on a wide range of diplomatic, economic, and security issues. New Delhi's critical priority is cooperation with the US and its like-minded partners worldwide, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. A major factor that could impact Tehran-New Delhi relations is the geopolitical divide between India and China. Ironically, despite being India's largest trading partner by volume, the Indian strategic community views Beijing as a rival that seeks to challenge New Delhi's positions in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. While Indo-Iran bonhomie has lost momentum on regional issues, a new chapter has been opened in India's partnership with the Gulf states.

However, Tehran and New Delhi's interests have traditionally converged regarding Afghanistan. Both countries share concerns about extremism and, in recent years, have also come to see Afghanistan in a broader Eurasian context in which Tehran sees New Delhi as a critical potential economic partner. Iran, which is directly affected by events in Afghanistan, has tried to convince the Taliban that an inclusive regime and stability in Afghanistan are vital to realizing the connectivity projects, including Chabahar Port and INSTC, to bridge the Eurasian and South Asian markets. Afghanistan has been the main focus of Indian and Iranian officials during their talks. The most significant obstacle to cooperation between India and Iran has been the American sanctions, particularly following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 and its later withdrawal in 2018. Additionally, the triangular relationships involving Saudi Arabia and Israel have introduced further challenges for Indian policymakers who must navigate regional stability. Developments in China's engagement with Iran, Russia's collaboration with Tehran, and sensitivities within Pakistan have further complicated India's strategic considerations. The situation in Afghanistan has

emerged as both a pivotal point and a potential source of tension in these bilateral relations, serving as both a connection and a hazard. These external influences have often overshadowed even stronger bilateral inclinations, underscoring the importance of systemic factors in shaping outcomes. Iran and India can play a constructive and valuable role in ensuring regional security, especially in Afghanistan, and bilateral economic trade and commercial relations amid various regional and extra-regional challenges.

The bond between the two countries has demonstrated significant durability. Even in the face of what is arguably the most stringent sanctions regime seen in contemporary times, Iran has upheld its role as a dialogue partner and a potential economic partner for India. Meanwhile, India has strengthened its strategic partnership with the United States and moved toward normalisation with Israel, yet it has not fully severed ties with Tehran. This ongoing engagement indicates that both strategic considerations and normative principles are crucial in maintaining their relationship, even when short-term advantages are limited.

Looking forward, the future of the relationship remains uncertain. As changes occur in the global energy sector, India is committed to achieving net-zero emissions, while Iran is realigning its focus towards China and redefining its regional security framework in light of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. These developments establish new parameters for the evolution of bilateral relations. It appears that India's hedging strategy will persist, characterised by verbal support for Iranian sovereignty and occasional high-level interactions. It is important to consider the limitations stemming from economic collaboration and the need to carefully navigate third-party sensitivities.

Scholarly recommendations for policy formulations

The following scholarly recommendations on India-Iran Strategic and Economic Relations would enhance and strengthen their bilateral relations.

First, India should develop a robust mechanism to facilitate trade and financial interactions with Tehran, even amidst international sanctions. This includes establishing alternative payment systems that extend beyond the US dollar, such as trade agreements in rupees, as well as investigating cryptocurrency or digital platforms for bilateral transactions. India's strategy must be proactive rather than reactive by instituting alternative financial pathways. Furthermore, this framework should incorporate insurance solutions for Indian enterprises engaged in trade with Iran, protecting them against sudden policy shifts.

Second, India ought to allocate significant resources and technical know-how to advance the Chabahar port's infrastructure, transforming it into a fully operational gateway for Afghanistan and Central Asia. In addition to developing physical infrastructure, India needs to negotiate long-term leasing agreements that ensure operational stability and commercial viability. Furthermore, India should consider establishing a special economic zone around Chabahar to attract investments.

Third, engaging Iranian expertise in renewable energy sectors such as solar and wind power—where both countries have complementary strengths—should also be pursued. Joint ventures in areas like energy technology, petroleum refining, and petrochemical industries would contribute to deeper economic integration between the two nations. It is essential to implement formal protocols for intelligence sharing regarding threats posed by terrorist and extremist groups operating in the region.

Fourth, Regular Track II dialogues involving academics, strategic thinkers, and business leaders would further enrich official discussions and yield innovative policy responses. Promoting parliamentary exchanges would cultivate broader domestic support for bilateral relations in both nations.

Despite their profound historical and cultural ties, soft power diplomacy has not been fully leveraged in India-Iran relations. India should significantly bolster

scholarship initiatives aimed at Iranian students in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and medicine, thereby nurturing a generation enriched by Indian educational experiences. Indian universities ought to create exchange programs and research partnerships with Iranian institutions centred on mutually advantageous topics like archaeology, studies of Persian and Sanskrit languages, as well as contemporary regional issues. Cultural centres should be established in major cities across both countries to promote language acquisition, artistic exchanges, and public awareness regarding bilateral relations. Tourism initiatives must also be promoted by streamlining visa processes, along with developing dedicated tourist routes that showcase shared heritage sites. Furthermore, establishing religious tourism, particularly pilgrimage paths for both Hindu and Muslim devotees, should serve as channels for fostering interpersonal connections between the two nations.

Fifth, Given that all three nations have a shared objective of enhancing regional stability and connectivity, India should focus on formalising trilateral cooperation mechanisms with Iran and Russia. Initially, the trilateral approach should prioritise connectivity initiatives, particularly the International North-South Transport Corridor, as this reflects a significant need for collaborative investments and integrated strategies. Stabilising and developing Afghanistan should be prioritised since all three nations confront common issues related to extremism and instability.

Six, With India's growing alliances with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel influencing its strategic dynamics with Iran, it is essential for India to formulate a comprehensive West Asia policy that acknowledges these partnerships while ensuring that Iran understands its ongoing strategic significance.

Seven, the instability in Afghanistan has a direct effect on the security and economic interests of both India and Iran. To address this, India and Iran should formulate synchronised policies towards Afghanistan, combining their

diplomatic efforts and economic aid to foster stability and promote inclusive governance. Both countries need to collaborate in ensuring that Afghan transit routes remain accessible, thereby supporting legitimate trade while preventing Afghanistan from becoming a hub for terrorism.

Eight, Relations between governments must be strengthened through dynamic engagement from the private sector. India should promote business delegations to Iran by organising targeted trade missions focused on sectors such as pharmaceuticals, information technology, agriculture, and manufacturing.

Nine, Cooperation in maritime security is a crucial pathway for fostering significant partnerships, particularly with India's rising status as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region alongside Iran's strategic geographic position. India and Iran must initiate ongoing naval discussions focusing on issues such as piracy, maritime terrorism, and the security of sea lanes. Conducting joint exercises in less contentious areas, like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, would promote operational collaboration while avoiding sensitive security matters. Both countries would benefit greatly from establishing agreements to share security information pertinent to maritime domain awareness.

The above-mentioned suggestion for policy formulation would address the basis of a comprehensive approach to India-Iran relations, providing a framework for strengthening strategic, economic, cultural, and security dimensions. Successful implementation requires sustained political commitment, effective bureaucratic organisation, and the ability to navigate complex geopolitical challenges. This multifaceted approach recognises that bilateral relationships should not revolve around a single issue but instead be built upon diverse, robust infrastructures capable of withstanding external pressures and domestic political fluctuations in both nations.

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Annexure

High-level visits between India and Iran

Source:- https://www.indianembassytehran.gov.in/eoithr_pages/MTY,
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HOS/Prime Ministerial level

Outgoing visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister	22-23 May 2016	Bilateral
2.	Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister	28-31 August 2012	To attend the 16 th Non-aligned Movement (NAM) summit
3.	Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister	10-13 April 2001	Bilateral
4.	Shri Narasimha Rao, Prime Minister	September 1993	Bilateral
5.	Shri Morarji Desai, Prime Minister	June 1977	Bilateral
6.	Smt. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister	April 1974	Bilateral

7.	Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister	September 1959	Bilateral
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HOS/Prime Ministerial level**Outgoing visits**

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	
1.	Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan	1963	
2.	Shri Varahagiri Venkata Giri	1974	

Incoming visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Dr. Hassan Rouhani, President	15-17 February 2018	Bilateral
2.	Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President	April 29, 2008	Bilateral
3.	Mr. Mohammad Khatami, President	24-28 January, 2003	Chief Guest at the Republic Day function
4.	Mr. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, President	April 1995	Bilateral
5.	Shah Mohammad Reza Pahalvi	February 1978	Bilateral
6.	Shah Mohammad Reza Pahalvi	February/March 1956	Bilateral

Vice Presidential level**Outgoing visits**

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Shri Jagdeep Dhankar, Vice President	22 May 2024	To pay condolences at the official ceremony following the demise of demise of President Dr. Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Dr. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and other Iranian officials in a helicopter crash.
2.	Shri M. Hamid Ansari, Vice President	04 August 2013	To attend swearing-in ceremony of President Dr. Hassan Rouhani
3.	Shri K. R. Narayanan, Vice President	October 1996	Bilateral

Incoming visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Dr. Mohammad Javad Mohammadzadeh, Vice president and Head of department of Environment	November 2012	11 th Conference of Parties (CoP) of UN Convention on Bio-diversity in Hyderabad

Parliamentary exchanges

Outgoing visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Smt. Meira Kumar, Speaker of Lok Sabha	November 2011	Bilateral

Incoming visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
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1.	Dr. Ali Larijani, Speaker of Majlis	24-28 February 2013	Bilateral
2.	Nazar Afsali, Chairman of India-Iran Parliamentary friendship group	26-28 February 2018	Bilateral

Ministerial level**Outgoing visits**

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Shri. Nitin Jairam Gadkari, Minister of Road Transport and Highways	30-31 July 2024	To attend the swearing-in of President Masoud Pezeshkian
2.	Shri Sarbananda Sonowal, Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways	13 May 2024	Bilateral
3.	Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister	14-15 January 2024	Bilateral
4.	Shri Sarbananda Sonowal, Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways	18-21 August 2022	Bilateral
5.	Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister	5-6 August 2021	To attend the swearing-in of President Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi
6.	Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister	7 July 2021	Bilateral
7.	Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister	22-23 December 2019	To attend 19th India- Iran Joint Commission Meeting (JCM)

8.	Shri Pon Radhakrishnan, Minister of State for Shipping	2-4 December 2017	To represent India at the inauguration of the Chabahar Port
9.	Smt. Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister	2 December 2017	Bilateral
10.	Shri Nitin Gadkari, Minister of Road, Transport, Highways and Shipping	5 August 2017	To attend swearing-in ceremony of Iranian President Dr. Hassan Rouhani
11.	Shri M J Akbar, Minister of State for External Affairs	10-12 September 2016	Bilateral
12.	Smt. Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister	16-17 April 2016	Bilateral
13.	Shri Dharmendra Pradhan, Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas	8-10 April 2016	Bilateral
14.	Smt. Maneka Gandhi, Minister for Women and Child Development	19- 21 January 2016	Special Guest in the 10th International Energy Management Conference
15.	Shri. Salman Khurshid, External Affairs Minister	03-05 May 2013	17 th India-Iran Joint Commission Meeting (JCM)
16.	Dr. Farooq Abdullah, Minister of New and Renewable Energy	March 2012	15 th NAM Ministerial Conference
17.	Shri S M Krishna, External Affairs Minister	May 15-17 2010	14 th G-15 Summit
18.	Shri Pranab Mukherjee , External Affairs Minister	July 29-30, 2008	15 th NAM Ministerial Conference

19.	Shri Pranab Mukherjee , External Affairs Minister	February 6- 7 2007	Bilateral
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Incoming visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Dr. Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, Foreign Minister	07-08 May, 2025	20th Joint Commission Meeting (JCM)
2.	Dr. Majid Takht Ravanchi, Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs	01-04 January, 2025	19th Foreign Office Consultation (FOC)
3.	Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharaei Ashtiani, Minister for Defense and Armed Forces Logistics	27-28 April 2023	To attend the meeting of the SCO Defense Ministers
4.	Dr. Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Foreign Minister	8-10 June 2022	Bilateral
5.	Brig. Gen. Amir Hatami, Defence Minister	2-4 February 2022	To attend the First Indian Ocean Defence Ministers Conclave and Aeroindia 2021
6.	Dr. Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister	14-17 January 2020	To attend Raisina Dialogue 2020
7.	Dr. Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister	13-14 May 2019	Bilateral

8.	Mr. Abbas Akhouni, Minister of Roads & Urban Development	9-12 January 2019	Bilateral
9.	Dr. Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister	7-9 January 2019	To attend Raisina Dialogue 2019
10.	Dr. Hassan Ghazizadeh Hashemi, Minister of Health and Medical Education	12-14 December 2018	Bilateral
11.	Mr. Abbas Akhouni, Minister of Roads & Urban Development	6-7 September 2018	Bilateral
12.	Dr. Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister	28 May 2018	Bilateral
13.	Mr. Bijan Zangeneh, Minister of Petroleum	11 April 2018	To attend the 16th International Energy Forum in New Delhi
14.	Mr. Mohammad Jahromi, Minister for Communications and IT	23-24 November 2017	To attend the Global Cyber Conference
15.	Dr. Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister	4 December 2016	To attend 6 th Heart of Asia-Istanbul process Ministerial Conference in Amritsar
16.	Dr. Abbas Akhouni, Minister of Transport and Urban Development	27-30 September 2016	Bilateral
17.	Dr. Ali Tayyebnia, Minister for Economic Affairs and Finance	26-28 December 2015	18 th Joint Commission Meeting (JCM)

18.	Dr. Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister	13-14 August 2015	Bilateral
19.	Shri Nitin Gadkari, Minister for Road Transport, Highways and Shipping	May 5-7 2015	MoU on Chabahar
20.	Mr. Akbar Torkan, Presidential advisor and Secretary of high Council of Free Zones	12 -15 January 2015	To attend the Vibrant Gujarat Summit
21.	Dr. Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister	28 February, 2014	Bilateral
22.	Eng. Majid Namjoo, Minister of Energy	October 2012	To attend the Global Ministerial level “International Seminar on Energy Access”
23.	Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati, Senior Advisor to Supreme Leader on International Affairs	December 2011	Bilateral

Secretary level

Outgoing visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Shri Dammu Ravi, Secretary(ER)	24 June 2024	19 th Asia Cooperation Dialogue Ministerial Meeting
2.	Shri Vinay Mohan Kwatra, Foreign Secretary	25 – 26 November 2023	18 th Foreign Office Consultations (FoCs)

3.	Shri Vijay Gokhale, Foreign Secretary	16 September 2019	16 th Foreign Office Consultations (FoCs)
4.	Shri Gopal Krishna, Secretary (Shipping)	26 February 2019	To attend Chabahar Day Event 2019
5.	Shri T.S. Tirumurti, Secretary (ER)	23-24 October 2018	1 st Coordination Council Meeting on Trilateral Transit Agreement between Afghanistan, India & Iran (Chabahar Agreement)
6.	Shri Alok Srivastava, Special Secretary (Shipping)	3-6 September 2017	6 th Joint Committee Meeting on Ports and Maritime Cooperation
7.	Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary	16-17 May 2017	14 th Foreign Office Consultations (FoCs)
8.	Rajiv Kumar, Secretary (Shipping)	November 31- December 2, 2015	Regarding Chabahar Port project
9.	Shri Rajeev Mehrishi, Finance Secretary	25-26 July 2015	Bilateral
10.	Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary	June 13-14, 2015	Foreign Office Consultations (FoCs)
11.	Smt. Nirupama Rao, Foreign Secretary	July 2011	9 th Foreign Office Consultations (FoCs)

Incoming visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Ahmad Khani Nowzari, Deputy Minister for Commercial Development Office, Ministry of Agricultural Jihad (Head of Delegation)	04 to 08 February 2024	Bilateral
2.	Ali Fekri, Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance of the Islamic Republic of Iran	13 December 2023	Bilateral
3.	Alireza Peyman Pak, Deputy Minister of Agriculture for Trade and Market Regulation	31st August to 2nd September 2023	Bilateral
4.	Deputy Minister of Agriculture Mohammad Mehdi Borumandi	10th June 2023	Bilateral
5.	Mr. Mehdi Safari, Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy	12-13 April 2023	1st India-Central Asia JWG on Chabahar Port
6.	Dr. Meisam Abedi, Deputy Minister of Information and Communication Technology	21-23 March 2023	Bilateral
7.	Mr. Ali Bagheri Kani, Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs	24 November 2022 18th Foreign Office Consultations (FoCs)	17th Foreign Office Consultations (FoCs)

8.	Mr. Mehdi Safari, Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy	15 June 2022	Bilateral
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Think Tanks/Others

Outgoing visits

Sl. No.	Name of dignitary	Duration	Purpose of visit
1.	Amb. Vijay Thakur Singh, Director General (ICWA)	14-17 January 2024	ICWA-IPIS Dialogue
2.	Dr. T.C.A. Raghavan, Director General (ICWA)	12-13 October 2019	ICWA-IPIS Dialogue
3.	Shri Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, President ,ICCR	3 December 2018	Bilateral
4.	Shri Jayant Prasad, Director General, IDSA	23-26 July 2016	Bilateral
5.	Shri Vinod Rai, Comptroller and Auditor General of India	June 2012	Bilateral, at the invitation of Supreme Audit Court of Iran (SAC)

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India-Iran Strategic and Economic Relations (1991-2022) Introduction Introduction In the field of International Relations, the term "strategic and economic relations" encompasses the various ways in which nations engage with one another, taking into account both security issues and economic transactions. These two aspects are essential to understanding state behaviour within the global arena. Strategic relations pertain to the connections established between states aimed at mutual protection. This can manifest through military alliances, defence collaborations, deterrence tactics, or calculations related to power dynamics. Such relationships align with realist theory, emphasising the quest for security amid a chaotic international landscape. The nature of "Strategic Relations" is characterised by assessments of threats, arms races, collective security agreements, and the deployment of military force or coercion as instruments of diplomacy. To uphold their sovereignty, safeguard crucial interests, and enhance their relative power against possible threats, states engage in strategic actions. Economic Relations encompass trade, investments, financial exchanges, and the economic interdependence among nations. The liberal institutionalist perspective emphasises that economic collaboration fosters peace through mutual advantages and interconnected interests. Aspects such as trade agreements, monetary coordination, development assistance, and economic sanctions are categorised under these economic relationships. Nations utilise economic strategies to enhance prosperity, secure resource access, and exert influence without resorting to military means. The relationship between these various dimensions is a subject of theoretical debate. Classical realists view economics primarily in relation to security concerns, whereas liberals argue that economic interdependence can reduce competitive tensions. Constructivists analyse how common norms influence both economic and security cooperation. Contemporary geopolitical economics further elaborates on how states strategically employ economic tools to achieve specific aims, thereby merging conventional distinctions. Recent research increasingly recognises the interconnectedness of these relations. For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) highlights the significance of strategic positioning in economic infrastructure endeavours. Similarly, financial sanctions imposed on Russia demonstrate how economic measures can be weaponised to support security agendas. To fully grasp today's international relations landscape, it is essential to understand the strategic motivations behind economic actions and how these connections either constrain or facilitate strategic choices, reflecting the complex interdependencies that define our modern global environment. The bilateral relations between India and Iran rank among the most complex and intricate relationships in contemporary international relations. The historical backdrop of these interactions is steeped in millennia of inter-civilizational connections, from which a modern partnership has emerged, evolving through various phases of collaboration and constraint influenced by shifting geopolitical, economic, and broader global dynamics. The period from 1991 to 2022 is particularly significant; it began with India's journey towards economic liberalisation following the Cold War and extended through the tumultuous early twenty-first century, characterised by changing global power structures, regional instability, and evolving strategic alliances. The conclusion of the Cold War in 1991, coupled with India's gradual economic reforms, fundamentally transformed the landscape of

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