

## ***India-Iran Relations amidst Strategic Constraints***

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Non-alignment, the lodestar of India's foreign policy decision-making, has gradually morphed into multi-alignment. Irrespective of the change in nomenclature, the point then and now is essentially about making the most of the prevalent nature of global geopolitics for the protection and promotion of India's national interest. The difference could be that non-alignment guided India's way in a bipolar world; multi-alignment is meant to guide India's rise in a multi-polar world. Multi-polarity is seen by many as more benign than a bipolar or a uni-polar world. Many countries, including India, are seen pronouncing that their interest will be better served in a multi-polar world order, and India's foreign policy is often projected as pursuing such an order. Bipolarity is usually condemned as world of military blocs, which had elicited the Non-aligned policy from India. Uni-polarity has, in any case, never been seen as a natural order or in the interest of countries like India. Thus, this has left multi-polarity as the preferred choice. Indeed, multi-polarity comes across as a configuration, which gives the space for more power centres in the international system to pursue their interests. It seems to allow more choices of aligning with different actors as per the strategic calculations of a particular country.

However, the choices in terms of partners and loose alignments that a multi-polar world order brings for India also brings along with it the challenges of traversing a wide field of geopolitical disruption. Such a scenario has most evidently been panning out in the tightrope walking that India has had to do in managing its ties with Iran while trying to absorb the shocks of a volatile US-Iran relationship that has seen quite a shift from the optimism of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 to the more recent walkout by the Trump administration. While it is certainly prudent for New Delhi to maintain multi-alignment in principle, the practice is easier said than done. This essay attempts to situate India-Iran relations

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in the emerging multi-polar world order and the challenges it presents as well as the opportunities. While delving into core areas of cooperation - like energy security and connectivity - this essay makes an attempt to dissect the US factor in this relationship. While undesirable, the US factor in India-Iran relations has been the most visible irritant. As such, the essay attempts to assess the emerging India-Iran relationship amidst the strategic constraints accruing out of an unstable US-Iran relationship.

### **Washington Tangle in India-Iran Relations**

Very often, India-Iran ties have been put under the test of fire as a result of the complex nature of US-Iran relations, and the upswing in India-US relations. Many times, Washington expects New Delhi to toe its line of thinking and action, especially whenever its relations with Tehran pass through stormy waters. In such cases, India's practice of strategic autonomy comes under test, as for example the case of India's vote at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over the controversial Iran's nuclear programme, or the constraints that India has faced while buying fuel from Iran amidst biting US sanctions. India's multi-dimensional relationship with Iran has often been projected as a litmus test for India's ability to maintain an independent foreign policy, more so because the single most important and persistent protest has come from the USA. Over the years, the American approach to the Iranian nuclear programme has only accentuated the difficulties of Indian policymakers when it comes to relations with Iran.

Post a meeting with her Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif in September 2018, India's Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj was quoted as saying that India has abided by the sanctions imposed by the United Nations, but not those imposed by any particular country.<sup>1</sup> She was referring to the sanctions imposed by the USA on Iran after walking out of the Iran nuclear deal that had earlier suspended a number of sanctions on Iran. Moreover, besides Russia and North Korea, Iran also comes under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), creating more constraints for India's ability to engage Iran in a number of sectors, most particularly energy security and connectivity projects, like the much debated Chabahar port. Although the recent waiver from the USA has given some relief in terms of commencing Chabahar operations, the tangle that any tension in US-Iran relations will get India into regarding its ties with Iran remains a matter of concern for Indian policymakers.<sup>2</sup>

### **India-Iran Cooperation in Regional and Cross-regional Connectivity**

The importance of the Chabahar port for the India-Iran relationship has been underscored at the highest level of the two governments. During the visit of President Hassan Rouhani of Iran to India in early 2018, both sides recognised that India-Iran cooperation should develop ‘multi-modal connectivity within and across the region.’ Developments like the ‘successful inauguration of the Phase-1 of Chabahar Port in early December 2017; the ratification of the Trilateral Agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan on the Establishment of International Transport and Transit Corridor by all sides; and the successful shipment of wheat assistance from India to Afghanistan through Chabahar Port’ were noted as significant not only for India and Iran, but also for regional and cross-regional stability and prosperity.<sup>3</sup> India’s investment by setting up plants in sectors like fertilizers, petrochemicals, and metallurgy in the Chabahar Free Trade and Industrial Zone (FTZ) has been welcomed by Iran. The first trilateral meeting between India, Iran, and Afghanistan in October 2018 over the implementation of the Chabahar port lends significance to this project which promotes India-Iran cooperation in terms of bringing economic benefits to war-torn Afghanistan, and also connects India to the markets of Central and West Asia. The three countries in 2016 had signed an agreement to establish a transit and transport corridor among them, and proposed the use of the Chabahar Port as one of the regional hubs.<sup>4</sup> Despite the economic viability of the port and its significance for India’s development assistance to Afghanistan, the geopolitics of the region, Sino-Pakistan designs in the region as well the uncertainty in US-Iran relations may still set limitations on the extent of India-Iran cooperation in this aspect.<sup>5</sup>

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has been an important component of India-Iran cooperation. The INSTC is a multi-modal connectivity project spanning around 7,200-km, including rail, road, and water routes across India, Iran, Central Asia, and Russia. The purpose of the project has been to reduce the cost and time of transport across this region; this has been vindicated by a report showing that the INSTC will make transport 30 percent cheaper and 40 percent shorter compared to the existing routes. Various dry runs along the INSTC route have constantly proved the viability of this project, and this can be seen in the revitalisation of this project between India, Iran, and Russia.<sup>6</sup>

During President Rouhani’s visit to India, the inclusion of the Chabahar port in the INSTC framework was emphasised. India’s accession to the Customs Convention on International Transport of Goods under the cover of

TIR Carnets (TIR Convention) and Ashgabat Agreement (an agreement to establish an international multimodal transport and transit corridor between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf) has also been seen as positive steps towards contributing to regional and cross-regional connectivity for joint economic growth.<sup>7</sup> Given the environment in which China has been promoting and projecting its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's involvement and leadership at the INSTC despite its economic viability, has also become a point of strategic significance in terms of India's aspirations for greater influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood.<sup>8</sup>

As such, in addition to being one of the major sources of energy supplies for India, Iran is also becoming an increasingly significant player in terms of fulfilling India's strategic aspirations beyond its immediate neighbourhood into Afghanistan, to Central Asia, and up to West Asia. Iran is a regional power in West Asia, with strategic ambitions to extend its influence beyond the region. Iran has a rich civilisational history, and has both the resources and the intention to become a regional power with global consequence. As such, it would be strategic naiveté for India not to try and sustain its ties with Iran if it intends to extend its influence beyond South Asia. India's foreign policy projects India's relations with Iran as a fundamental component of India's Look West policy. Iran has been an important partner for India. The Tehran Declaration of 2001 and the New Delhi Declaration of 2003 are the benchmarks based on which relationship has become a strategic one for both the countries.<sup>9</sup>

### **India-Iran Cooperation in Energy Security**

America's insistence on using sanctions as a foreign tool has always been a sore point among countries that try to shore up ties with Washington. At times, countries like India have been at the direct receiving end of American sanctions, or else India has been caught in the crossfire as in the case of Iran. Earlier, New Delhi and Tehran had to negotiate their ways out of the impact of American sanctions on Iranian banks, thus making it difficult for India to pay for the purchase of fuel from Iran. As India grows, and would like to sustain the growth at some stable rates, access to an uninterrupted and commercially viable source of energy has become a major component of India's foreign policy objectives. Although, the search for viable alternative sources of energy continues to be a main pursuit, India will still not be able to substantially cut down the demand for fossil fuel in the near future.<sup>10</sup> Although reports point to a substantial increase in Indian imports of crude oil from the

USA, many are of the opinion that this does not mean that US oil will replace oil imports from Iran. According to many, commercial viability will decide the quantum and the source of Indian crude oil imports, and not pressure from any country. As such, Iranian oil will likely continue to be a mainstay of Indian imports, and India's own assessment of its interest will determine the course of India-Iran ties, and not pressure from Washington. The impact of Indian oil imports from the USA is particularly interesting in the context of the emphasis given to making the USA a major energy exporter in its National Security Strategy (NSS). The NSS 2017 stated,

For the first time in generations, the United States will be an energy-dominant nation. Energy dominance—America's central position in the global energy system as a leading producer, consumer, and innovator—ensures that markets are free and U.S. infrastructure is resilient and secure.<sup>11</sup>

The NSS added,

As a growing supplier of energy resources, technologies, and services around the world, the United States will help our allies and partners become more resilient against those that use energy to coerce'.<sup>12</sup>

The extent of American sanctions and the reach of its financial institutions might present tactical hurdles for India to engage with Iran, but India's practice of its strategic autonomy will mean that it is not likely to allow the USA to determine the nature of its relations with Iran.<sup>13</sup> It is important to recall that the then US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, during her visit to India in June 2018, had said,

All of us have to rethink who we choose to do business with. I think as a friend India should also decide, is this a country they want to continue doing business with. So, yes I had that conversation with Modi. It was a constructive conversation ... I think for the future of India, future of resources, we would encourage them to rethink their relationship with Iran.

These remarks were made in the context of Washington demanding countries buying oil from Iran to cut their imports to 'zero' by 4 November 2018.<sup>14</sup>

While speaking to the press in November 2018, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo contended that the Trump Administration had been quite clear regarding Iran and the US response. 'We understand that the Islamic Republic of Iran presents a threat to the United States of America, and we are determined

to stop it,' he said.<sup>15</sup> Hence, developments in US-Iran relations are bound to have an impact on the course of India-Iran relations, and this will happen despite New Delhi's position that no third party intervention will be allowed to affect its relations with Tehran.

India-Iran ties have been built on a mutual understanding of complementariness and have been particularly seen as a test of India's ability to practice its strategic autonomy in the face of American intransigence. In fact, reports have pointed out that India's crude oil imports from Iran actually increased as the US threatened sanctions.<sup>16</sup> India had imported about 2.57 million tonnes of oil worth an overall of \$1.42 billion from Iran in October 2018, marking a 36 percent increase over the same period in the previous year.<sup>17</sup> The USA eventually gave waivers to eight countries, including India, from the sanctions slapped on oil imports from Iran. The Trump Administration's rationale for the waiver was that it did not want to impose sanctions to a point where it would have a shocking impact on global oil prices.<sup>18</sup> However, some restrictions have been put in terms of the volume of crude oil imports from Iran. The second order effects of US sanctions are as important in terms of understanding the complexities that the US action presents to the India-Iran bilateral engagement.

For instance, the Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) had stopped purchasing Iranian crude for a certain period, since its insurance company refused to provide coverage because of US sanctions. According to reports, Indian insurance companies were giving 'asset cover', but were not 'covering the crude kept in storage'.<sup>19</sup> Whenever US sanctions have made it difficult for India to pay for Iranian oil, the two countries have often resorted to rupee payment.<sup>20</sup> During President Rouhani's visit, both sides 'agreed to move beyond [the] traditional buyer-seller relationship' in the energy sector and 'develop it into a long term strategic partnership,' including negotiation over the Farzad B gas field.<sup>21</sup> Earlier, the fall of oil imports from Iran were reported after differences cropped up over development rights for this gas field. Later, it was reported that the two sides have resumed negotiations over the issue.<sup>22</sup>

The geopolitics of laying gas pipelines has also been a significant component of India-Iran ties, with the once vigorously debated Iran-India-Pakistan pipeline going on to the backburner due to tenuous US-Iran relations. As an alternative, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline was brought to the fore, on which work has been going on. Although some proposals have been floated to resume the IPI pipeline, it will still be severely constrained by

uncertainty in US-Iran relations. International cooperation on pipelines has been a major part of India's energy security policy, but this has been at the mercy of the rapidly changing geopolitical environment in the region.<sup>23</sup> There have emerged different permutations and combinations of international pipelines, and the task is cut out for New Delhi in terms of weighing the options and making its choices for the protection and promotion of its interest in a viable and uninterrupted supply of energy. For instance, there has been a proposal to construct a 1,300-km undersea pipeline from Iran, avoiding Pakistani waters, to bring natural gas to India at much cheaper rates.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Russia and Pakistan have signed a memorandum of understanding to build an underwater gas pipeline from Iran to Pakistan and India. According to reports, Moscow intends to inform Iran and India about the signing, and work on a similar understanding with India. In November 2017, Russia and Iran had signed an understanding, lending Russian support for Iran supply to India, and a Russian-Iranian working group met for the first time in March 2018 to discuss the implementation of the project.<sup>25</sup>

### **Indian Ocean Partners**

Besides the core areas of cooperation between India and Iran (like energy security and transport corridors), another area that present a set of opportunities and challenges is maritime cooperation. Both sides have been expressing an 'interest in enhancing cooperation possibilities in the maritime domain. It was agreed to hold dialogue to look into measures for cooperation in [the] defence sphere, including port calls by naval ships, training and regular exchanges of defence delegations.'<sup>26</sup> Indian naval warships have been making goodwill visits to Iranian ports and have engaged in professional interactions, including exercises at sea. India-Iran maritime understanding can also be taken forward through the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which is a forum to build maritime cooperation among littoral countries of the Indian Ocean region (IOR). The 2018 IONS and Conclave of Naval Chiefs were held in Tehran, and the Indian Navy Chief, Admiral Sunil Lamba, went on a five day visit to Iran. His visit was 'also aimed at consolidating bilateral naval relations between India and Iran and to explore new avenues for naval cooperation.'<sup>27</sup>

Given the critical waterways in which India and Iran are located, and the significance of the Indo-Pacific region in global geopolitics, greater maritime cooperation between India and Iran makes complete strategic sense. However, the USA remains the primary partner for India as far as the emerging security

architecture of the Indo-Pacific is concerned. The USA defines the Indo-Pacific as the region extending from the western coast of India to the western coast of the USA, which practically leaves out countries like Iran to India's west.<sup>28</sup> According to India, the major littoral countries of the IOR - like Iran - are very much a critical part of the Indo-Pacific, and remain important partners in the geopolitics of the region extending from the South to Central and West Asia. However, the USA considers Iran as one of its principal threats, and this has been made clear over and over again in its policy documents and official speeches. As such, how New Delhi is going to balance its maritime engagements with Tehran while hoping to deepen its engagement with the USA in the Indo-Pacific remains a matter of policy discourse.

### **Conclusion**

India is undoubtedly one of the significant poles of the emerging multi-polar world order, and its foreign policy approach will be of consequence in the international system. As opposed to a bipolar or a uni-polar world order, a multi-polar order provides much room for choosing partners in the international system. Such an order has given rise to debates about the notion of multi-alignment as the lodestar for India's foreign policy direction in the 21st century. However, the practice of strategic autonomy that gives the flexibility to do what is required for the protection and promotion of India's interest remains the base, whether the policy is non-alignment or multi-alignment. Thus, in the final analysis, it boils down to the opportunities and challenges for India to practice its strategic autonomy in the current scheme of things. In this context, to what extent the contours of India-Iran relationship have a synergy of their own, and to what extent it is constrained by third parties, remain the crucial questions. India has had to do its balancing act regarding its approach to West Asia, such as building concurrent relations with countries like Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. But, it is Washington's approach to Iran that has had the most consequential and visible impact on India's relationship with Iran.

The symbiotic relationship between India and Iran is quite apparent. Iran possesses some of the largest reserves of oil and natural gas in the world and India, as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, needs uninterrupted access to energy supplies to sustain its growth rate. Also, Iran occupies a significant geopolitical space in terms of India's aspiration to reach out to its west beyond its immediate neighbourhood, into Central and West Asia. There are many suitors for Iran's role as a major player in the West Asian region,



including India's primary competitor, China. Thus, in the interest of constraining China's ability to extend its influence further into West Asia, it might be prudent for Washington to understand India's rationale in building a stable relationship with Iran. Sanctions in US foreign policy have become a sort of a standard operating procedure that is slapped on any country that, in a standard fashion, does not toe America's line of thinking and action. The India-Iran relationship is significant from a multi-faceted point of view. Despite strategic constraints, the most significant of which has been the ups and downs of US-Iran relations, India has maintained its pragmatic streak of foreign policy, with the aim of widening its foreign policy options and choices. It will be worthwhile to note that India has never had any fundamental conflict of interest with Iran and, for a number of reasons, beyond just access to oil and gas. Iran is likely to remain a priority in India's strategic calculations. A sober assessment of this reality by the USA will well not only augur well for India-Iran relations and India-US relations but also has the potential to open communication channels between Washington and Tehran through New Delhi.

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- <sup>7</sup> 'India-Iran Joint Statement during Visit of the President of Iran to India,' Ministry of External Affairs,
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- <sup>13</sup> Richa Mishra and Amiti Sen, 'India: No deal to choose US oil over Iran's; price alone will decide,' *The Hindu Business Line*, September 9, 2018, at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/policy/india-no-deal-to-choose-us-oil-over-irans-only-price-will-decide/article24909877.ece>, accessed December 05, 2018. Also see, Harsh V. Pant and Julie M. Super, 'Balancing Rivals: India's Tightrope between Iran and the United States,' *Asia Policy*, 2013, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 69–88.
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