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Iran through the Lens of India: Strategic Interests and Emerging Challenges in the Post-Cold War Period

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Abstract

As India aspires to enhance its role in global politics and secure its position as a major power, it has pursued strategic policies such as the Look East/Act East Policy, Connect Central Asia Policy, and Look West Policy. Within the framework of the Look West Policy, Iran holds significant importance for India—not primarily due to bilateral ties, but because of its broader strategic value. This paper analyses the critical role Iran plays in advancing India's national interests, particularly in the areas of energy security, regional connectivity, market expansion, and geopolitical influence. Iran's vast natural resources, strategic location at the crossroads of Central and West Asia, and the development of the Chabahar Port are essential components of India's vision for an 'Extended Neighbourhood.' The study also highlights the growing challenges India faces, including increased Chinese engagement in Iran and the constraints posed by U.S. sanctions. The paper concludes that for India to maximise its strategic advantages, it must adopt a more cohesive and proactive foreign policy approach toward Iran—one that balances opportunities with emerging geopolitical realities.

Keywords: India's foreign policy, Look West Policy, Iran's strategic importance, Energy security, Chabahar Port, Gwadar Port, Geopolitics, Regional connectivity, China's 25-year big deal, US Sanctions

Introduction

Who doesn't want to be powerful? The same applies to a nation-state in international politics. Every country aspires to be powerful to influence global politics and the economy. India, one of the most powerful countries in South Asia, has secured the status of a regional and emerging global power in the 21st century. Guided by a realist foreign policy, India has consistently prioritized its national interests since gaining independence—this has always remained its highest priority. In the changing global political landscape of the 1990s, marked by the collapse of the USSR and the rise of globalization, India's policymakers began to adopt a more strategic and security-centric foreign policy approach. As a result, India introduced several path-breaking foreign policy initiatives. In 1991, it launched the Look East Policy to strengthen relations with Southeast Asian nations. This was later rebranded as the Act East Policy in 2014 (Majumder, 2021) ^[19]. In 2005, India initiated the Look West Policy to enhance engagement with the Arab Gulf countries, Israel, and Iran. Another significant initiative was the Connect Central Asia Policy, launched in 2012 to deepen ties with Central Asian countries (Ghosh, 2017) ^[12].

As part of its Look West Policy, India has consistently prioritised its relationship with Iran. Historically, India and Iran share a long-standing civilizational bond, but their ties were significantly weakened during the British colonial period in the Indian subcontinent. In 1950, both nations signed a Treaty of Friendship and Perpetual Peace, but Cold War geopolitics soon strained the relationship. Iran joined the U.S.-backed Baghdad Pact in 1954, while India strongly opposed both the Baghdad Pact and SEATO, denouncing them as a '*dangerous alliance*' (Fair, 2018). At that time, India pursued a non-aligned foreign policy, distancing itself from Cold War power blocs. Beyond these ideological differences, several other political and strategic issues further complicated the relationship. However, in the post-Cold War era, India increasingly recognised Iran's geopolitical importance. As a result, the two countries sought deeper engagement, marked by key agreements such as the Tehran Declaration (2001) and the Delhi Declaration (2003).

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These agreements represented a turning point in India-Iran relations. In 2016, bilateral ties were further strengthened through a trilateral agreement signed by India, Iran, and Afghanistan. That same year, a joint statement titled “Civilizational Connect, Contemporary Context” was issued, reflecting shared historical ties and modern strategic interests (MEA Report, 2024). In 2024, the two nations signed a 10-year strategic agreement for the development of the Chabahar Port, reinforcing their long-term commitment to regional connectivity and cooperation. Most recently, the 19th India-Iran Foreign Office Consultations (FOC) were held on 3 January 2025 in New Delhi. During this meeting, both sides reviewed all areas of bilateral cooperation, including agriculture, trade, cultural exchanges, people-to-people ties, economic issues, and the development of Chabahar Port (MEA, 2025). However, this paper has analysed Iran through the lens of India. Why Iran matters for India?

Iranian Energy

India's relationship with Iran can be primarily analysed through the lens of energy security, which has long been a cornerstone of bilateral cooperation. Iran is one of the most energy-rich countries in the Middle East. Iran surpassed Saudi Arabia in 2023 to become the second-largest oil producer in the Middle East, accounting for 4.8 percent of global oil production and ranking fifth worldwide.

At the end of 2023, in the Middle East Iran holds 24 percent of oil reserves and 12 percent globally (BP Statistical Review of World Energy Report, 2024). Despite sanctions, Iran managed to increase its crude oil output by 1 million barrels per day from 2020 to 2023, largely due to surging exports to China, which reportedly grew by almost 890 million barrels per day during that period. However, U.S. sanctions on Iran were expanded further in April 2024 (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). Iran—and West Asia more broadly—collectively supply approximately 60 percent of India's oil needs. With India's rapid economic growth and its emergence as a regional power, energy security has become a top priority in its foreign policy. Between 2006–07 and 2018–19, Iran was one of India's top oil suppliers, accounting for 13 percent of India's oil imports in 2007–08 and 9 percent in 2018–19.

Regional Connectivity

In regional connectivity, Iran plays a vital role, particularly in linking India with Afghanistan, CIS, and beyond, bypassing Pakistan. To directly access these, the Chabahar Port offers a strategic opportunity for India. For India, Chabahar is not just a port but a gateway to untapped markets and enhanced geopolitical influence. Before delving into the strategic significance of Chabahar, it is important to understand its origins and development. The term Chabahar comes from two Persian words: Chahar, meaning “four,” and Bahar, meaning “spring,” which together signify “a place with spring in all four seasons.” Chabahar Port is located in southeastern Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, on the Gulf of Oman. It comprises two separate terminals: Shahid Kalantari and Shahid Beheshti, each with five berths (Pethiyagoda, 2018; Johanna, 2019) [25, 17]. The original vision for Chabahar was conceived by the last Shah of Iran, who aimed to develop maritime trade and improve infrastructure in the underdeveloped Sistan-Baluchistan region. Construction began in 1977, but progress was

hindered by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and further disrupted by the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88).

India's involvement began in 2003 when Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee assured Iran of India's commitment to developing the port (Singh & Singh, 2019) [29]. A significant milestone came in 2015 with the signing of an intergovernmental Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for India's participation in the port's development. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in 2016, India signed the Chabahar Agreement alongside Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, creating a Trilateral Transit Agreement (Annual Report, MEA, 2020). As part of the agreement, India committed to investing \$500 million in developing the port. The implementation responsibility was handed to India Ports Global Private Limited (IPGPL) in collaboration with Iran's Arya Banader. This agreement transformed Chabahar into a key node in the emerging international transport and transit corridor (Gaur, 2024) [11]. By 2017–2018, under this trilateral framework, India had sent approximately 110,000 tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses to Afghanistan via Chabahar. Notably, India shipped 75,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan using this route. Since 2018, India has been operating the Shahid Beheshti terminal—its first direct control over a foreign port. Although development was hampered by international sanctions on Iran (Johanna, 2019) [17], India remained committed. In 2022, India announced plans for a long-term operational agreement, which culminated in a 10-year contract signed in 2024. Under this agreement, IPGL and Iran's Port and Maritime Organisation (PMO) agreed to jointly operate and develop the Shahid Beheshti terminal. India pledged to invest \$120 million, alongside a \$250 million line of credit for port modernization—highlighting India's long-term strategic vision for Central Asia (Gaur, 2024) [11].

1. **Connectivity with Afghan Region:** Chabahar Port is a cornerstone of India's regional connectivity strategy and a crucial tool for safeguarding national interests. It offers India direct access to Afghanistan, which has an underdeveloped but promising market for trade and investment (Dabas, 2016) [8]. Additionally, Afghanistan holds significant strategic value in India's security considerations. India is deeply cautious about Taliban-led Afghanistan, particularly due to historical incidents such as the 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight to Kandahar. The Taliban regime demanded the release of three hardened terrorists—Omar Sheikh, Maulana Masood Azhar, and Mushtaq Ahmad Zargar—in exchange for the passengers (Abdol Majid, 2012) [1]. Despite security concerns, India has always adopted a soft power approach toward Afghanistan. It has provided extensive support to Afghanistan's elected governments and remains committed to countering both Taliban influence and Pakistan's strategic foothold in the region. India's cultural and economic ties with Afghanistan have been strong, except during the Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001 (Ghosh, 2019) [13]. According to Abdol Majid (2012) [1], India's strategic interests in Afghanistan can be summarized as: a. Countering Pakistan's influence in the region, b. preventing the resurgence of the Taliban and c. using Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asia.

2. **India's Central Asian Vision:** India's aspirations in Central Asia are driven by two primary motives: Energy Security. With rapid industrialization and economic growth, India's energy demands are increasing significantly. Central Asia, rich in natural resources, is a crucial region for India's energy strategy. According to the BP Survey of World Energy (2020): the CIS countries hold 32.03% of the world's proven natural gas reserves, Kazakhstan has 93.7 trillion cubic feet (1.3%) of the global total, Turkmenistan holds 688.1 trillion cubic feet (9.8%), Uzbekistan has 42.7 trillion cubic feet (0.6%), Kazakhstan also holds 2.4% of the world's coal reserves as of 2019. India aims to import oil, natural gas, uranium, and minerals through Chabahar to meet its growing energy needs. Market Expansion: As one of the world's fastest-growing economies, India is actively seeking new markets. Central Asian nations represent emerging economies with trade potential. India's engagement is part of its broader market expansion strategy (Cheema, 2013) ^[7].
3. **Connectivity through the INSTC:** The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is another major initiative where Chabahar Port plays a key role. INSTC is a multi-modal transport project that connects the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran and onward to northern Europe through St. Petersburg, Russia. This project, initiated by India, Iran, and Russia in 2000 and ratified in 2002, aims to reduce transit time from 40–60 days to 25–30 days, cut carriage costs by 30%, and reduce overall transit time by 40%. INSTC has grown to include multiple members: India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Syria, Turkey, and Ukraine. Bulgaria holds observer status (Sharma & Menezes, 2018) ^[28]. India has proposed formally integrating Chabahar Port into the INSTC framework. According to India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan are also being encouraged to join. This move will strengthen India's connectivity with Asia and Europe while bypassing both Pakistan and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Sharma, 2021) ^[29].

Geopolitical Significance

1. **Bypassing Pakistan to Afghanistan:** With the world's largest population and the sixth-largest economy, India—long a seeker of permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council—is a major contender for future global superpower status. To achieve this, India must expand its access to global markets. Afghanistan, along with Western and Central Asia, is strategically important in this regard. However, there are no direct land or sea routes from India to these regions that do not pass through Pakistan. Virtually all overland routes to Afghanistan and beyond must go through Pakistan—a country that has historically denied India such access (Aliasgary & Ekstrom, 2021) ^[2]. The India-Pakistan relationship remains tense due to longstanding issues such as the Kashmir conflict, multiple wars and military skirmishes, cross-border

terrorism, water disputes, political and ideological differences, the nuclear arms race, diplomatic frictions, and the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. Despite these challenges, India has consistently maintained strong bilateral ties with Afghanistan during its democratic periods, although relations have been strained under the Taliban regime. A major obstacle to connectivity between India and Afghanistan is the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) region, which prevents any direct land link between the two countries. In this context, Iran's Chabahar Port holds immense strategic value for India. The port provides India with a direct maritime trade route to Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan altogether. The Chabahar Port connects to Iran's Zahedan via rail, and from Zahedan to Zaranj at the Afghanistan border. From there, India's construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway facilitates access to Central Asia and beyond. Strategically, Afghanistan acts as a vital land bridge in India's efforts to engage with Central Asia, a key part of the broader Eurasian region. Since Pakistan has persistently blocked India's access to these regions via its territory, Iran has emerged as a critical partner in India's geostrategic calculus (Singh & Singh, 2019) ^[29].

2. **Monitoring Chinese Activities and the Gwadar Port:** Pakistan's Gwadar Port, currently under development as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), represents a significant geostrategic concern for India. Situated close to the mouth of the Persian Gulf and just below the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar is Pakistan's third major oceanic commercial port after Karachi and Port Qasim. The port is also a vital component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Gurjar, 2023) ^[14]. Managed by the Chinese Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC), Gwadar has seen billions of dollars in Chinese investment. Incentives such as a 23-year income tax holiday, along with exemptions from sales tax and customs duties, have further fuelled its development. However, India views this with caution, particularly in light of China's Indo-Pacific strategy, which draws heavily from Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory of maritime dominance—"He who controls the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is likely to dominate all of Asia." China's growing naval presence, including attempts to deploy the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) at Gwadar and its involvement in other regional ports in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, signals a broader strategic ambition. India perceives this as a potential threat, especially the risk of China using Gwadar for military purposes to choke India's maritime lifelines and energy trade through the Arabian Sea. In response, India has taken steps to monitor activities at Gwadar and reduce the influence of Sino-Pakistani naval operations in the region (IYEA, 2021). The development and strategic use of Iran's Chabahar Port are key to this strategy. Increased Indian involvement in Chabahar enhances its presence in the Indian Ocean and offers a counterbalance to China's growing regional influence.



Fig 1: Geographical Location of Chabahar and Gwadar Port. (Pethiyagoda, 2018) ^[25]

- Moreover, the Iranian Chabahar Port provides India with direct access to Iranian energy resources and creates an alternative trade route that bypasses the conflict-prone Strait of Hormuz (Pethiyagoda, 2018) ^[25]. In essence, Chabahar serves both as a strategic economic gateway and a geopolitical lever for India in its efforts to secure its regional and global interests. India has approximately 69 per cent crude oil imports from West Asia via the Strait of Hormuz, which is near to the Gwadar port of Pakistani, India feels insecurity by the Chinese funded Pakistani Gwadar Port and India's concern further that India's commercial port of Mumbai could be marginalized by the Gwadar port (Singh and Singh, 2019) ^[29].

Markets and Cultural Diplomacy

Iran holds significant importance for India, not only strategically but also in terms of its market aspirations. Iran is a populous country in the Middle East with a large and largely untapped market (Torabi, 2025) ^[31]. In the era of globalization, as India sought new markets, Iran emerged as a key destination for Indian exports. Major Indian exports to Iran include rice, iron, tea, organic chemicals, insecticides, fabrics, man-made staple fibres, electrical machinery, pharmaceuticals, fine chemicals, paper, and paperboard (Islam, 2020). Iran would also be helpful for India to access the markets of the CIS.

Beyond trade, India's engagement with Iran also has deep cultural dimensions. The India–Iran connection is ancient and deeply rooted in civilisation. In the 21st century, this cultural bond was institutionalised through the inauguration of the Indian Cultural Centre in Tehran by Shri Salman Khurshid. In 2018, it was renamed the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre. The centre regularly organizes musical performances, literary events, and other cultural programs that reflect the shared heritage and promote bilateral understanding. According to the MEA Report, in enhancing cultural exchange between India and Iran, several MoUs were signed in 2016 during Modi's visit to Iran. The center has celebrated significant Indian cultural events, including International Yoga Day, Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary. During Shri Vinay Sahasrabuddhe's visit to the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 2018, a seminar was held to highlight the linguistic ties between Persian and Hindi (MEA, 2020). Another vital aspect of India's relationship with Iran is the Indian diaspora.

Approximately 80 to 100 Indian families are residing in Tehran, around 15 in Zahedan, and more than 2,800 Indian nationals are pursuing religious and academic studies in Qom, Mashhad, and Esfahan (Islam, 2020). This diaspora plays a significant role in maintaining people-to-people ties and fostering goodwill between the two nations.

Challenges

- Chabahar – Zahedan Railway Issue:** One of the major challenges came in 2020, when the Iranian government decided to proceed with the construction of the Chabahar–Zahedan railway (located in Iran), extending further to Zaranj in Afghanistan, without Indian financial support. Iran cited delays in funding and inaction from IRCON (Indian Railway Construction Company) as the primary reasons for moving ahead independently. The project, originally part of a 2016 trilateral agreement between Iran, India, and Afghanistan, was to be executed with a \$400 million allocation from Iran's National Development Fund. Subsequently, responsibility for the project was transferred to an Iranian company.
- China's Iran Vision:** In recent years, Iran has increasingly embraced China, which it now views as a more strategically valuable partner. Hostile U.S.–Iran relations and repeated sanctions have strained India–Iran ties, prompting Tehran to seek closer relations with Beijing as a strategy to break its international isolation. Conversely, Chinese policymakers recognise the Middle East's geopolitical significance—especially Iran's role—in linking Asia to Europe through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), often described as part of the “new great game.” (Madani, 2022) ^[18]. This convergence of interests culminated in a landmark \$400 billion economic and strategic partnership deal between Iran and China, to be implemented over 25 years (Smeltz, Farmanesh & Helm, 2021) ^[30]. Under the agreement, China will invest across various sectors of the Iranian economy, including telecommunications, banking, railways, and port development. In return, Iran will supply China with oil at heavily discounted rates for the duration of the partnership (Rasanah, n. d). China is also well aware of the geopolitical significance of the Chabahar port, as it has the potential to become a major global trading hub and a focal point of geopolitical rivalry. Like India, China has also

expressed interest in leveraging Chabahar's strategic location to its advantage. However, a sustained Chinese presence in Iran poses a serious strategic concern for India.

3. **US Factor:** India's engagement with Iran has been significantly influenced by the hostile relations between Iran and the United States. Indian policymakers have consistently prioritized their relationship with the US over Iran on critical issues such as Iran's nuclear program, the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline, and US-imposed sanctions on Iran. In 2005, India voted against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) when the agency passed its first resolution against Tehran, eventually referring the matter to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This vote aligned with US interests and highlighted Washington's influence on India's foreign policy. Although India reiterated its support for the right to peaceful use of nuclear energy under the framework of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee emphasized that "Iran must pursue a nuclear enrichment program under its international commitments and obligations, and satisfy the international community that its program is indeed peaceful" (Wellman, 2010) ^[33]. The US also discouraged India from participating in the IPI pipeline project and the LNG deal signed between India and Iran, despite the potential benefits for India, including a stable supply of natural gas. According to *Pakistan Hotline* (2010), the IPI pipeline was not implemented largely due to pricing issues and the impact of US sanctions on Iran. India-Iran relations further deteriorated when the US imposed stringent sanctions on Iran and urged all countries to cease importing Iranian oil. Following US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement ending the Significant Reduction Exceptions (SREs) for Iranian oil importers, India was compelled to halt its imports from Iran and instead increased purchases from countries like Saudi Arabia.

As a result, India's oil imports from Iran dropped drastically—from \$987 million in 2019–20 to just \$12.5 million in 2020–21. By 2024–25, Iranian oil accounted for a mere 0.04% of India's total oil imports, worth only \$70.1 million (Aggarwal & Tiwari, 2025) ^[3]. Iranian oil, although offered historically at a favourable price to India, offers preferential trade terms and a shorter shipping distance.

Conclusion

Iran is one of the key geopolitical pivot states in the Eurasian region. Its abundant natural resources, strategic geographical location, and the Chabahar Port are vital instruments for advancing India's 'Extended Neighbourhood Policy' and supporting its aspirations to become a global superpower. However, India's approach to Iran can also be analyzed through the lens of soft power. To maximize its strategic interests, Indian policymakers must adopt a more deliberate and cohesive foreign policy—both towards Iran and in response to growing Chinese influence in the region.

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