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INDIA-IRAN: MAXIMISE NATIONAL INTERESTS

India must make the most out of whatever convergence of interests it has with Iran. In this multipolar world, transactional approach to diplomacy is the way forward for countries to maximise their national interests.

On 17 May 2021, in another hit to India's aspirations in the West Asia, Iran awarded a contract for developing the ONGC Videsh Ltd-discovered Farzad-B gas field in the Persian Gulf to a local company. Naturally, Iran's snub has been seen as a setback for India.¹ Tehran justified its action by stating that the US sanctions could hinder international partners from executing its commitments in Iran and therefore, the Shi'ite regime has to develop the gas field by its own.² Setbacks like this has now become an almost recurring pattern in the bilateral relationship between New Delhi and Tehran with geopolitical issues adversely affecting ties. These geopolitical issues have largely stemmed from the acrimonious relationship between the United States and Iran, whose hostility to each other has also cast a shadow on India-Iran relationship.

This article departs from the dominant claim that Iran is indispensably critical for India's strategic interests. Much of that claim comes from Iran's location in the world map. It is a Shi'a country situated to the west of both Pakistan and Afghanistan, and opens up to the resource rich Central Asia to its north. Its location has such an outsized impact on Indian Foreign Policy that New Delhi sees Tehran's utility in everything from reduction of Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan to securing its cooperation in protecting the integrity of energy lines. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the fact that expecting too much from Iran could give it a veto on Indian Foreign Policy options. The biggest casualty of that could be the India-US strategic relationship, which is actually indispensable for India's strategic interests now.

Iran — Third Wheel In India-US Relations

India-Iran relationship has seen

many highs and lows but the current hiccups in ties have largely emerged from the previous Trump Administration's decision to pull the United States out of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran Nuclear Deal in 2018, citing that the nuclear deal did not target Iran's ballistic missile programme, its nuclear activities beyond 2025, and its role in conflicts in Yemen and Syria. The return of hostility between Tehran and Washington made it difficult for India to insulate its relationship with Iran from the transactional nature of Trump diplomacy. To avoid secondary sanctions, India had to roll back its oil import from Tehran and quietly adopted a US-mandated trade and investment boycott of Iran.

Since then, relations between India and Iran have not been sailing smoothly. Without seeing the Indian move within the context of Tehran's own isolation owing to its Nuclear

1. PTI, "India loses ONGC-discovered Farzad-B gas field in Iran," Times of India, 17 May 2021, Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/india-loses-ongc-discovered-farzad-b-gas-field-in-iran/articleshow/82706202.cms>. Accessed on 1 June 2021

2. "India in touch with MEA over Farzad-B: MEA," The Hindu, 20 May 2021, Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-in-touch-with-iran-over-farzad-b-mea/article34608534.ece>. Accessed on 1 June 2021

Programme, the Ayatollah-regime has been flagging New Delhi's compliance of American sanctions either subtly or crudely.³ The centrality of anti-American stance in Iranian Foreign Policy and Tehran's fixation for looking at every bilateral relation from that stance has made it a strategic liability for New Delhi. For India, the United States is indispensable in its attempts to pushback Chinese aggression in the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). But Tehran is not willing to factor that in its dealings with New Delhi. Worst of all, Tehran has embraced Beijing with an economic and strategic agreement worth \$400

billion to escape the crippling sanctions imposed unilaterally by the Trump Administration. In the agreement, of particular concern to India, are the two proposals of "joint training and exercises, joint research and weapons development and intelligence sharing" and the plan by China to build several ports in Iran; one of them at Jask, just outside of 'Strait of Hormuz', which is the entrance to the Persian Gulf.⁴ Two-thirds of the oil and half the liquefied natural gas that India imports come through the 'Strait of Hormuz' and increased Chinese activity there could be a strategic nightmare for India.

Tehran has **embraced Beijing** with an economic and **strategic agreement** worth **\$400 billion**



Mohammed Zavad Zarif, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, held talks with Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar in Tehran.



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While the deal could mean wider Chinese containment strategy for New Delhi in South Asia, which now includes Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, Tehran has prioritised its need for an economic lifeline and international support to counter the US-Israel-Saudi axis over anything else. And, China is willing to provide both. Noted Strategic expert Harsh V Pant says, "managing American sanctions has been the primary task" of the Iranian Foreign Policy.⁵

3. P. MacRae, "Iran disappointed with India's lack of 'resilience' in the face of U.S pressure," Hindu Business Line, 16 November 2019, Available at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/iran-disappointed-with-indias-lack-of-resilience-in-the-face-of-us-pressure/article29986097.ece> Accessed on 9 June 2021
4. A. Singh, "The maritime implications of growing China-Iran strategic ties", Observer Research Foundation, 30 July 2020, Available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-maritime-implications-of-growing-china-iran-strategic-ties/> Accessed on 1 June 2021.
5. H. V. Pant, "If India Is Losing Iran, Tehran Too Is Responsible for Dip in Ties," ThePrint, July 24, 2020. Available at <https://theprint.in/opinion/if-india-is-losing-iran-tehran-too-is-responsible-for-dip-in-ties/467483/>. Accessed on 2 June 2021

It is this burdening shadow of Iran in US-India relations which has now provided the Modi government an opportunity to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Indo-Iranian relations.

Sour Ties - Reasons

Iran has been a 'friend in court' in the Islamic world for India to neutralize Pakistan's criticism of New Delhi over the Kashmir insurgency (Iran acknowledged Kashmir as an integral part of India during Prime Minister P.V. Narashimha Rao's visit to Tehran in 1993) and the conditions of Indian Muslims since the early 1990s. With the inflammatory comments by the Ayatollah on the abrogation of Article 370 and Delhi riots, eyebrows were raised at Iran's sudden and unusual criticism of India's internal issues.⁶ What could only be explained as an attempt by Iran to gain leverage over India to compel it to execute works on Chabahar Port and other commitments; such disparage comments, however, on the internal matters of another sovereign country is highly unsavoury. Particularly at a time when India is trying to isolate Pakistan internationally over the Kashmir issue; Iran, being a 'strategic partner' to India under the 2003 Delhi Declaration should have known better.

Chabahar Port itself has become a bump in the bilateral relationship. India sees Chabahar as a counter-balance to the Gwadar Port on the south-western

coast of Pakistan's restive Balochistan province, run almost entirely by China as a part of its expansive China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). On the other hand, Iran has reiterated multiple times that Chabahar is a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and not an exclusive project handed over to India.⁷ Now that China and Iran have signed an agreement worth \$400 billion, Chabahar is very much exposed to China's spending capabilities. Ranjit Gupta, former Indian ambassador to Yemen and Oman says that if Chinese investments flow into Chabahar in future, Beijing may become the largest investor in the development of the port given India's delays in executing its international commitments.⁸ This could imperil India's strategic interests,

which is why External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited Tehran in September 2020 to seek assurances from the Shi'ite regime that Chinese investments in Chabahar are kept at a bay. However, Iranian Foreign Minister's Zaved Zarif's tweet about the meeting, 'active engagement with our neighbourhood is our top priority', suggests Iran's non-commitment to addressing Indian concerns.⁹

Iranian belligerence against Arab world has also factored in Modi government's foreign policy calculus. India has much more to gain from its engagement with the US-allied Arab Gulf states, both economically and strategically, as converging interests between New Delhi and Washington are uniting



India has taken over operations of the strategic Chabahar Port in Iran.

6. D. R. Chaudhury, "Iran continues to criticise India in unusual move," The Economic Times, 5 March 2020, Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/iran-continues-to-criticise-india-in-unusual-move/articleshow/74500570.cms?from=mdr> Accessed on 8 June 2021
7. K. Taneja, "India's Strategic Unicorn in Chabahar," Mint, 10 December 2017, Available at <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/GxkTd5CNtdJGH1HjftutGXN/Indias-strategic-unicorn-in-Chabahar.html>. Accessed on 4 June 2021
8. K. Pethiyagoda, "India's Pursuit of Strategic and Economic Interests in Iran," Brookings, 26 September 2018. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/indias-pursuit-of-strategic-and-economic-interests-in-iran/>. Accessed on 2 June 2021
9. N. Basu, "Jaishankar in Iran as India's Worried about China Deal & Beijing 'Grabbing' Chabahar Port," ThePrint, 8 September 2020, Available at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/jaishankar-in-iran-as-indias-worried-about-china-deal-beijing-grabbing-chabahar-port/498260/>. Accessed on 4 June 2021

each other like never before. As for the Arab states, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has emerged as India's largest trading partner and reliable ally in areas of counter-terrorism after a spate of extradition and deportation of terror suspects by Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E to Indian authorities.¹⁰ Thus, while Tehran has been actively trying to "derail Indo-Iranian ties by interfering in Indian domestic matters", major Arab powers have engaged with India more pragmatically.¹¹

The Way Ahead


While some commentators continue to suggest that Iran's jaundiced view of abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir and Delhi Riots and the decision to 'go ahead alone' with the development of Farzad-B are in fact strategic moves aimed at nudging India to fulfil its commitments and defy US sanctions, yet fact remains that Iran will never come to terms with India's strategic relations with United States so long as it considers Washington as an 'existential security threat'. The call by the entrenched dogmas for greater overtures to Iran to steer it away from China by curtailing the full potential of Indo-US strategic relations among other things should be resisted.¹² Such a false step can prove to be costly at a later date.

In a Multipolar world with narrow

Chabahar Port itself has become a bump in the bilateral relationship

national objectives, it is unwise to expect Iranian reciprocity on every matter, or in the words of External Affairs Minister of India S. Jaishankar — a 'congruent' relationship.¹³ Because of narrower national interests and objectives, even Friends and Allies are now striving hard for better terms in bilateral relationships. Thus, the future is more about constant engagement to manage divergences and finding stability.¹⁴ Constantino Xavier claims that India cannot 'afford to think of permanent friends anymore in its neighbourhood but only afford to have permanent interests and those interests are to deliver more and connect closer with its neighbours'.¹⁵ Such assessment also holds true for India's extended neighbourhood. Thus, despite all the divergences, India must continue working closely with Iran along converging interests like stable Afghanistan, safe and secure energy lines in the Persian Gulf and sincere fight against Sunni Islamic radicalism. Both countries are still committed to a working relationship. This could be gauged from the recent visit to Tehran by the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to greet

newly-elected President Ebrahim Raisi. Despite being a hardliner who is known to take tough stand on America, Jaisankar became the first foreign dignitary to meet the President-elect.

Thus, India must make the most out of whatever convergence of interests it has with Iran. In this multipolar world, transactional approach to diplomacy is the way forward for countries to maximise their national interests. Chasing an all-weather Iranian friendship for fanciful goals based on entrenched dogmas will only give Tehran a veto on Indian Foreign Policy options. A clearer definition of interests and determined pursuit of them is necessary to influence agendas and outcomes. Such hard realism calls for greater risk-taking in diplomacy. This could create greater friction in bilateral ties but risk aversion may lead to loss of new opportunities. Playing safe in Iran may cost India the innumerable benefits presented by the recent thaw between Arabs and Israelis or realising the full potential of Indo-US strategic relationship. 

10. R. Ahuja and J. Jacob, "Of 24 Terror Suspects Turned in by Gulf Countries to India since 2012, 18 Are from UAE and Saudi," Hindustan Times, 24 August 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/of-24-terror-suspects-turned-in-by-gulf-countries-to-india-since-2012-18-are-from-uae-and-saudi/story-225ND6iIOaWrD9mYZYRFLl.html>. Accessed on 5 June 2021
11. H. V. Pant op. cit.
12. M. Duggal, "What the China-Iran strategic cooperation pact means for India," The Diplomat, 9 April 2021, Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/what-the-china-iran-strategic-cooperation-pact-means-for-india/> Accessed on 9 June 2021
13. S. Sirohi, "Jaishankar defines India's place in the world: open for business, but conditions apply," ThePrint, 13 October 2019, Available at <https://theprint.in/opinion/jaishankar-defines-indias-place-in-new-world-open-for-business-but-conditions-apply/305227/> Accessed on 6 June 2021
14. S. Jaishankar, "The Art of the Disruption," India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World, Harper Collins India, 2020.
15. R. Venkataramakrishnan, "India cannot afford to think of permanent friends anymore in its neighbourhood," Scroll.in, 22 August 2020, Available at <https://scroll.in/article/971091/india-cannot-afford-to-think-of-permanent-friends-anymore-in-its-neighbourhood-constantino-xavier> Accessed on 9 June 2021