

Relationship between India and Iran in Present Context

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Abstract:

Iran is an important and powerful state in the Middle East. On the other hand, India is an emerging power in Asia. The two countries have had good relations in the past. But now, under the pressure of the big powers, the relations between the two countries have broken down. As a result, India's foreign policy has faced so many challenges. India should overcome all these challenges as soon as possible. If not, India will be far away to fulfill its dream. In this paper, I tried to show the present relationship between India and Iran in South Asia.

Keywords: Cold war, Chabahar port, TAPI pipeline, Islamic ideology, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Strait of Hormuz.

1. Introduction:

First of all, India-Iran relations span millennia marked by meaningful interaction. The two countries shared a border till 1947 and share several common features in their language, culture, and traditions. Independent India and Iran established diplomatic links on March 15, 1950. Regarding relations between the two countries, the Iranian president Hassan Rouhani visited India in 2018, said that “the relations between the two countries go beyond and business”¹. If we look at History, we can see that there were ups and downs in relationship between India and Iran. Mohammed Mosaddegh, the then prime minister of Iran (1952-1953) was a fan of Mahatma Gandhi and his ideology. Not only has the prime minister of Iran but all Iranians had enough respect for Gandhian ideology. Mohammad Mosaddegh said that “Mahatma Gandhi was a rare human being who, with a miraculous technique, brought India up to the heights on which he stands today. In Gandhiji’s dictionary, religious differences and sectarian prejudices had no place whatever. In fact, he was the greatest supporter of Indian Muslims. Gandhiji not only stabilized the greatness of his country in his own lifetime but also left behind men like Jawaharlal Nehru who is a finished product of the Gandhi school”. But the US did not have a very good relationship with the then prime minister of Iran. That’s why the US has always wanted the pro-American President to be in power in Iran. And later there is the new Prime Minister Mohammad Shah Reza Pahlavi instead of Mohammad Mosaddegh, who was largely pro-American. Actually, at that period of cold war India was a good ally of the USSR. Overall, Shah did not like Indian Prime Minister Nehru and his foreign policy. Because the prime minister of India had very good relations with Egypt during the cold war². And on the other hand, Iran had good relations with Pakistan which became a major problem existing Indian foreign policy. Pakistan has always been opposed to India’s entry into OIC (organization of Islamic cooperation) and Iran has been supporting it since 1969 and India has wanted to join OIC as an observer state from the outset. But India did not been able to meet its expectation due to Pakistan’s obstruction. Despite having a small member of Muslims in countries like Russia and Thailand they have already accepted membership as OIC as observer states. Since then so many important events have taken place in Iran such as the Islamic revolution, Iraq Iran war. As a result, the Iranian government has not given priority to establishing a relationship with India at that time³.

2. After Cold War:

The end of cold war presented both India and Iran with new challenges and opportunities. Since the early 1990 Indo-Iranian interests have converged around several issues, such as energy security, stability and opportunities in Central Asia, terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan, prospects of mutual benefit from commercial ties, and the possibility of strategic ties in

defense and intelligent areas. Iran's turn towards India reflected a shift in its foreign policy - towards an emphasis on national interest as opposed to Islamic ideology - which became manifest in the 1990s. After the cold war, Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Iran in 1993 and since then relations have been improving with Iran⁴. For example, in 1994 Pakistan wanted to pass a resolution on the Kashmir issue at the United States Human Rights Council. But that resolution was not passed in support of Iran. After that Iran's relations with the US have been deteriorated by the 9/11 attacks. On the other hand, Iran's relations with India were getting stronger day by day⁵.

After that, in 2001, The Tehran Declaration was signed by the former prime minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Iran the then-president Mohammed Khatami laid the foundation for cooperation on a wide range of issues. It focused heavily on energy and commercial concerns, reaffirmed a commitment to developing the north-south transport corridor, and enshrined agreements to promote scientific and technical cooperation. Two years later, in January 2003, both leaders were signed the Delhi Declaration along with seven additional memorandums of understanding and agreements, which constituted the most substantial set of frameworks guiding the Indo- Iran relationship. These relations between India and Iran have been stronger since 2003 when Iranian president Mohammed Khatami appeared as a chief guest on republic day in India. Since then, the ties between them have been gradually strengthening⁶. According to a BBC World Service poll conducted at the end of 2005, 71% of Iranian viewed India's influence positively, with 21% viewed it negatively, the most favorable rating of India for any country in the world. But a year later, India embittered Iran. India voted against Iran in IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) resolution⁷. In fact, it has taken steps to curb Iran's nuclear program and India took such steps against Iran, only with the support of the US. As a result, the good relations between India and Iran are slowly deteriorating. Though India and Iran's relations were back on track in 2008 when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to India and India reassured him to follow an independent policy towards Iran and not succumb to US pressure. Despite being an oil-rich country, it witnessing a lot of protests due to increased corruption and unemployment. In addition to this due to the various sanctions on Iran at the international level, Iran has collapsed a lot in terms of economy. So, Iran needs help from the outside world where they can sell oil and gas and they will be able to strengthen their economy⁸.

3. Importance of India:

Iran is a strategic and important country to India. Iran has always been one of India's main suppliers of oil, second only to Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In connection with Iran which is seen as a gateway to Central Asia and this connectivity is one of the most important avenues of cooperation. India has committed itself to increase oil take-off by 25%, as part of easing negotiation for Farzad-B gas fields and also committed itself to invest US\$ 500 million to build Shahid Beheshti port at Chabahar as well as US\$ 2 billion invest to build a rail line through the Zahedan province to Afghanistan, in an effort to circumvent trade restriction by Pakistan⁹. Both sides agreed to facilitate insurance of visas to promote tourism and people to people contacts and the Agreement for the Avoidance of Double Taxation was signed to promote bilateral trade and investment. They also signed a bilateral Extradition Treaty and it was also decided to have

exchange cooperation in the maritime domain. The two countries agreed to hold dialogue to look into a measure for defense cooperation. There is also cooperation to tackle violent elements, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is largely due to the ongoing politico-security crisis, particularly in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia, where terror groups such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) have penetrated in different forms¹⁰.

3.1 The Chabahar rail project:

India has currently involved in the construction of a 560-mile long railway line linking the Iranian port with the iron ore mines in Hajigak in southern Afghanistan. These railway links will increase India's position and leverage in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region, after Pakistani blockage. Apart from the impact on security and regional politics, this more importantly implies that Indian companies will have opportunities to start exploration over Afghanistan mineral wealth which is estimated to be close to 3 trillion. On the other side one of the biggest advantages in recent times is that India's offering a credit line to the Iranians. That's a very substantial element in the hands of the Indians to offer the different projects to Iranians and this credit, which is in rupees, is beneficial to Indians. According to financial structure, Indian companies will benefit from it¹¹.

3.2 IPI project:

India has vigorously been pursuing the Iran- Pakistan- India (IPI) gas pipeline project for the last decade. This operation of the IPI project would be reinforced by the trilateral framework agreement, in which the three governments would be committed to the provision of the energy charter treaty¹². But in recent times this pipeline has been stuck and Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan- India (TAPI) pipeline yet to take off. Now India is very keen to kick start an undersea pipeline project that would bring Iranian gas to India via the Arabian Sea bypassing Pakistan. This is a great opportunity for India to transport natural gas from Iran to Porbandar port in Gujarat and the Zaranj -Delaram Highway is being built with financial support from India. This road was constructed by India in 2009. It can give access to the Afghanistan garland highway. Basically, a strategic partnership between India, Iran, and Russia is intended to establish a multi-modal transport link connecting Mumbai with St Petersburg, providing Europe and former Soviet republics of Central Asia access to Asia and vice versa and Iran may also provide connectivity to Central Asia and Europe, via the INTC (International North-South Transport corridor), which is estimated to be 40% less expensive than trade via Red sea- Suez Canal- Mediterranean route¹³.

3.4 Chabahar port:

The port of Chabahar is one of the main pillars of the relationship between India and Iran. It is located on the Makran coast in the southeastern part of Iran. This coast is a relatively underdeveloped free trade and industrial zone, especially when compared to the port of Bandar Abbas, further west. It is also the Iranian port with direct access to the Indian Ocean. India wants to develop it to counter China which started to build Pakistani Gwadar port. This port will allow India to bypass to transport goods to Afghanistan and Central Asia. It will help India in expanding maritime commerce in the region. It also provides opportunities for Indian companies

to penetrate and enhance their footprint in the region. It is located 76 nautical miles west of the Pakistani Gwadar port, being developed by China. This makes it ideal for keeping track of Chinese or Pakistani military activity-based out of the Gwadar.¹⁴

4. Recent Challenges of India:

From the Indian perspective, the growing Iran and China's relation is a cause of worry about changing strategic landscape. Not only the good relations between China and Iran but also the good relations between the US and India are having a bad impact on India. Basically, India is the second-largest buyer of Iranian crude oil after China. But in recent times India brought down its crude oil import from Iran to zero since the past one-and-half years to save its entities from US sanctions. Now India has established permanent supply relations with Saudi Arabia, the US, and Russia for oil and natural gas¹⁵. In addition to this, the issue arises is that the US has imposed various economic sanctions on Iran as well as the US has withdrawn itself from the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) agreement. This agreement was signed by six countries (US, Russia, France, Britain, China, and Germany) to contain the Iran nuclear program and the JCPOA was endorsed by the UN in 2015. In addition to keeping Iran on the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) blacklist, the US has been steadily increasing its good relations with India. As a result, Iran is interfering in Indian internal matter¹⁶.

Actually, Chinese influence on Iran has increased day by day and they have recently been agreed to invest some US\$ 40 billion in the Iranian oil and gas field over the next 25 years. At present time, China has been planned to build several ports in Iran one of them at Jask, Just outside the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait of Hormuz is among the nine Maritime choke points across the world. Apart from this, India is now facing various problems with the port of Chabahar. It is quite near to Gwadar port but the presence of China may endanger for Indian ambitions. The Chabahar port is the gateway to Central Asia for India. It can connect with the border town of Zaranj in Afghanistan and beyond. In recently India and Iran signed a new agreement to construct a rail line from Chabahar to Zaranj. But the Iranian government has decided to proceed with the construction on its own, citing delays from the Indian side in funding and starting the very project. Therefore, this rail project has been dropped¹⁷.

5. Conclusion:

Iran is an important ally of India. If we look at the history of relations between the two countries, we can easily find evidence of this. At present, Iran is so important to India that it can help India strengthen its economy. Because through Iran, India will be able to expand trade in central Asia and Europe. Not only that, India will be able to keep itself ahead in the global power race and it will be much easier to counter China's foreign policy. If Iran moves away from India, India will fall under the siege of China from all sides. As a result, India's economy will suffer a lot and outside India, China will take away all trade opportunities from India. Thus China has encircled India on almost all sides through its One Belt One Road project and the Maritime Silk Route and at the same time, if Iran becomes a colony of China, it is easy to understand that India will face so many problems in the future. So, India needs to fortify her ties with Iran as soon as possible while maintaining a balance between China and the US.

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