

# The Dynamism of Iran-India Relations: 1979-2009

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## Abstract

Relations between Iran and India, two ancient civilizations, go far back in history. However, the contemporary politico-economic relations between these two major Asian powers, especially after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, are affected by various different domestic, regional and international elements. The main objective of this research is to analyze the dominant foreign policy trends in Iran-India relations during the last three decades. A historical review of the evolution of transitional trends in Iran and India's foreign policy approaches, especially during the Post-Cold War era, with an emphasis on the role of different internal, regional and international elements in shaping these approaches, would bring new light on the study of relations between these two countries. The effects of these different approaches on Indo-Iranian relations and the future perspective of these policies will be analyzed in this paper.

**Keywords:** Iran, India, foreign policy, energy, nuclear policy, Asia, the United States

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## Introduction

Foreign policies of different countries, by and large, are based on strategies chosen by the states to safeguard their national interests and to achieve their goals in international relations. Based on such a definition, the approaches in the field of foreign policy studies are strategically employed to develop interactions between different nations and improve peaceful bilateral and multilateral cooperation based on their national interests. In fact, the purpose of studying foreign policy is to provide a convenient basis to understand foreign policy trends through state decisions and actions in the international arena.

Relations between Iran and India, two ancient civilizations, go far back in history. *New Delhi and Tebran have pursued a robust relationship with each other as two major Asian powers.* However, the contemporary politico-economic relations between these two major Asian powers, especially after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, are affected by various different domestic, regional and international elements. In fact, the existing realities of the regional and international arenas and also the dominant domestic ideologies have dictated different foreign policy approaches to policy makers of both sides, especially during recent years. *Accordingly, analyzing different dimensions of the "New Delhi-Tebran axis" and its implications for the structure of balance of power on both regional and international levels have become significant.*

The main objective of this research is to analyze the dominant foreign policy trends in Iran-India relations during the last three decades, after Iran's Islamic Revolution. A historical review of the



evolution of transitional trends in Iran and India's foreign policy approaches, especially during the Post-Cold War era, with an emphasis on the role of different internal, regional and international elements in shaping these approaches, would bring new light on the study of foreign relations between these two countries. The effects of these different approaches on Indo-Iranian relations and the future perspective of these policies will be analyzed in this paper.

### **I. Indo-Iranian Relations since India's Independence**

Following the independence of India in 1947, the two governments established diplomatic links on 15 March 1950. Then Indian Premier Jawaharlal Nehru's policy towards Iran was based on mutual regional cooperation, *Panchshila* and a policy of non-alignment (Dormandy & Desai, 2008). However, due to the U.S. intervention in Iran in 1953 to overthrow democratically-elected Iranian Premier Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq over the issue of oil nationalization and the design of the Cold War international relations structure, Iran's sympathy towards the Western bloc and its relations with India's arch-rival Pakistan, some obstacles prevented the improvement of bilateral ties.

Iran was concerned by the following issues in its relationship with its eastern neighbor, India; the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir, Afghan-Soviet-Indian amity, the Soviet interest in securing direct access to the Indian Ocean, India's growing economic and military strength as an Indian Ocean power as well as its expanding ties with the Arab world.

On the issue of Indo-Pakistani relations, Iran was the first country to recognize the newly-independent state of Pakistan in 1947. Under the regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran moved closer to Pakistan in many fields and the two nations worked closely with each other. Pakistan, Iran and Turkey joined the United States-sponsored CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) defense treaty which extended along the Soviet Union's southern perimeter. The relationship between Iran and Pakistan was further strengthened in the 1970s by a joint



endeavor to suppress a rebel movement based in the provinces of Iranian Baluchistan, Pakistani Baluchistan and Afghani Baluchistan. Iran is also believed to have assisted Pakistan financially in its development of a nuclear program after India's surprise test detonation of Smiling Buddha in 1974.

At the same time, Iran tried to mediate the conflict between India and Pakistan on several occasions. Nevertheless, during the Indo-Pakistani War that broke out on 17 September 1965, Iran supported Pakistan's claim over Kashmir and confined this support to political statements and limited logistical aid, although it gave extensive relief support. (Tahir Kheli, 1977) At that time, Pakistan's Air Force (PAF) sought to acquire additional aircraft from Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Turkey and China within 10 days of the commencement of the war. It succeeded in obtaining some assistance from Asian countries with large Islamic populations, including Turkey, Iran and Indonesia (Fricker, 1969). After the war, the Pahlavi regime offered to mediate between India and Pakistan, and during separate visits to both countries Mohammad Reza Pahlavi urged both sides to settle their differences peacefully. But in the late 1960s, Iran transferred a large number of fighters to Pakistan which were used against India in the war of 1971.

During the following war in 1971, also when U.S. President Richard Nixon's administration supported Pakistan both politically and materially, Washington proposed a UN resolution warning India against going to war. The U.S. sent military supplies to Pakistan, routing them through Jordan and Iran. (Shalom, 1991) Nixon also persuaded Iran and Jordan to send their F-86, F-104 and F-5 fighter jets to the aid of Pakistan (Burne, 2003).

During the 1970s, Iran tried to follow the policy of non-military involvement in support of Pakistan. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi viewed the Simla agreement between India and Pakistan as a welcome step in creating peace and normalizing the situation in a zone that was of a great significance to regional security and stability as well as in



promoting regional cooperation (Times of India, 1973). During 1965-70 the volume of Iran's trade with India and the bilateral economic relationship increased significantly with the establishment of a joint Indo-Iranian endeavor to develop the Madras Refinery, an iron ore mine at Kudamukh and an irrigation canal to help grow more food grains in the Rajasthan Desert (Parveen, 2006). Iranian export of natural gas to Pakistan and India was also discussed before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, given the length of the required pipeline, the political uncertainty in Pakistan and the precarious nature of that country's relations with India, as well as the stage of economic development in the two countries at the time, the project did not seem economically or politically feasible. (Maleki, 2007)

At a political level, the fundamental objective of this type of cooperation on behalf of the Pahlavi regime was to reduce Indian dependence on Soviet aid and motivate this country to depend more on the Western bloc. The Pahlavi regime also wanted to secure Indian backing of its Persian Gulf policy and ease concerns about the safety of the Indian Ocean in the face of expected Soviet penetration. The Pahlavi regime wanted the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean to be declared a "nuclear-free peace zone". A slight reluctance was noted by Indira Gandhi during her visit to Iran in 1974 and avoided approval of this matter except on the matter of a "peace zone". Indira Gandhi's reluctance was on the one hand based on the growing fear of the Pahlavi regime's military build-up and its aspirations to dominate the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, Gandhi was careful about maintaining friendly ties with the Soviet Union. In the end, Iran and India agreed that a constructive relationship based on political understanding and sound economic cooperation would promote stability and lasting tranquility in the region. (Parveen, 2006)

In the late 1970s, India successfully improved bilateral relations by developing mutually beneficial economic exchanges with a number of Islamic countries, particularly Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other Persian Gulf states. The strength of Iran's economic ties with India



enabled New Delhi to build a strong relationship with Tehran, which helped India during the Indo-Pakistani War in 1971, causing discontent in other Islamic countries (Heitzman and Worden, 1995). In fact, closer ties with the West Asian countries were necessitated by India's dependency on petroleum imports. Oil represented 8% of India's total imports in 1971; 42% in 1981.

Two events in 1979 - the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in support of the pro-Soviet Marxist regime in Kabul - complicated India's relations with Iran. From the Indian perspective, these two events and the Iran-Iraq War changed the balance of power in West Asia. (Mudiam, 1994)

The Islamic Revolution in Iran re-structured the way in which the world established relations with Iran. Revolutionary Iran withdrew from CENTO and dissociated itself from strategic cooperation with the United States and other Western countries. Based on its "Neither East nor West" policy, Iran condemned both the United States and the Soviet Union as equally malevolent forces in international politics. The revolutionaries embraced the notion that the materialist ideologies were ploys to help maintain imperialist domination of the Third World. Consequently, a major foreign policy goal originating from the time of the revolution has been to preclude all forms of political, economic, and cultural dependence on either Western capitalism or Eastern socialism.

Following this novel approach, Iran extended its hands towards the members of the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the new Iranian government was not warmly received by India. During the 1980s, India was trying to change its conventional "negative equilibrium" policy to a functional approach in order to improve its relations with both blocs gradually. The signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation between India and the Soviet Union in 1971 tarnished New Delhi's image as a non-aligned nation. Furthermore, during the second half of the 1980s, Rajiv Gandhi began to pursue policy in a direction significantly different from his



mother, Indira Gandhi's take on socialism. He improved bilateral relations with the United States — long strained owing to Indira Gandhi's socialist leanings and close friendship with the USSR — and expanded economic and scientific cooperation. Generally, it seems that Iran and India passed through different processes and adopted different approaches toward the structure of international relations during the last decade of the Cold War.

On the other hand, the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran inspired the entire Muslim world, including Muslim minorities in the Indian sub-continent. Although most Muslim communities in India are Sunni, their leaders welcomed the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which was based on Shiite teachings. Kashmiri Muslims invited the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini to stay in Kashmir when the Iraqi regime announced that Imam Khomeini must leave Iraq in 1978. On December 5, 1978, Imam Khomeini sent a letter to the religious leaders and also people of India to describe the situation Iranians faced under the Pahlavi regime and their struggle against the government's discrimination. He also invited "the great nation of India" to support the movement of "the oppressed people of Iran". (Zahirinejad, 2003)

On the regional level, New Delhi, which traditionally enjoyed close relations with Kabul, condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan only in the most perfunctory manner and provided diplomatic, economic, and logistical support to the Marxist regime in Kabul. Conversely, Iran's post-revolutionary relationship with the Soviet Union and its allies was significantly less positive. Iran severely criticized the Soviet Union for dispatching its troops into Afghanistan and took the lead several months later in denouncing Moscow at a conference of foreign ministers of Islamic countries. (Amir Arjomand, 1984)

India was also worried about Iran-Pakistan relations under the new circumstances. However, after 1979, the new Islamic government in Iran distanced itself from the Pakistani government as the latter



was a formal strategic ally of the U.S., and received military support from Western countries to play the role of the main ally of the Western bloc in South Asia. This matter changed Iran's position about its Islamic neighbor and the new government in Tehran ceased to be a potential supporter of Pakistan, which would have created a situation unfavorable to India. Iran also frequently objected to Pakistan's attempts to draft anti-India resolutions at international organizations such as the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (former known as the Organization of the Islamic Conference) and the Human Rights Commission to improve its relations with India. (Siddigui, 2010) Nonetheless, both Pakistan and Iran opposed the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and coordinated covert support for the Afghan *mujahedeen*.

At the time, India continued to purchase oil from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. In return, it provided engineering services, manufactured goods, and labor. However, the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War forced India to shift its oil purchases from Iran and Iraq to Saudi Arabia and the other Persian Gulf states. New Delhi took a neutral position in the Iran-Iraq War; it maintained warm ties with Baghdad while building workable political and economic relations with Tehran. (Damodaran & Bajpai, 1990)

With the end of the Cold War, relations between Iran and India entered a new stage. During the 1990s, Iran tried to follow a *détente* policy and assumed a new "Look to the East" policy to improve relations with Asian states. At the same time, India was also looking for a better position as an emerging power in the international arena. The two countries began to improve their relations from various politico-economic and strategic aspects. However, two decades after the collapse of the USSR, there are still deep seated differences between the foreign policy approaches of Iranian and Indian policymakers. In fact, they look at the new structure of the international system from different perspectives. Below, the roots of this structural differentiation in Indo-Iranian foreign policy making





processes and the effects of these differences on bilateral relations will be discussed.

## **II. Indo-Iranian Political Cooperation during Post-Cold War Era**

In September 1993, fourteen years after Iran's Islamic Revolution, Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Tehran. The highlights of the visit included discussions on the construction of a pipeline to supply Iranian natural gas to India and allowing India to develop transit facilities in Iran for Indian products destined for the landlocked Central Asian republics. It is noticeable that from the early 1990s, India became a major energy importer and thus needed to improve relations with energy exporting countries; a development which could be seen as one of the important motives underlying the improvement of bilateral relations with Iran.

When Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visited India on April 1995 to sign a major trade accord and five bilateral agreements, Indo-Iranian relations were on the upswing. The trend was consolidated and enhanced at the turn of the millennium by ensuing visits by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2001 and a return visit by President Mohammad Khatami in 2003, who was received as the Chief Guest at the Republic Day function.

India was interested in forging a long term strategic relationship built around energy security and transit arrangements. Iran was also ready to work with India to provide viable and rapid access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia. According to Kanwal Sibal, Foreign Secretary of India, "India and Iran have shared geo-political interests in the pursuit of which this part of Asia can be knit into networks of economic cooperation with increased stability as a consequence." (Sibal, 2003)

In January 2003, the two countries launched the "New Delhi Declaration," a strategic partnership "for a more stable, secure and prosperous region and for enhanced regional and global



cooperation.” (The New Delhi Declaration, 2003) Since then, Indian firms have signed many different contracts with Iran's government especially in the field of energy.

In its 2005-2006 annual report, the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Indo-Iranian cooperation had “acquired a strategic dimension flourishing in the fields of energy, trade and commerce, information technology and transit.” (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2007)

In Post-Cold War era, the first arena of regional cooperation between the two countries was Afghanistan. It was in war-torn Afghanistan in the 1990s that India and Iran discovered they shared common security concerns from the threat posed by the Pakistan-backed Taliban regime. Both India and Iran extensively supported the Afghan Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime. They continue to collaborate in supporting the broad-based anti-Taliban government led by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, which is also backed by the United States. The New Delhi Declaration in 2003 called for the two states to “broaden their strategic collaboration in third countries”, a clear reference to Afghanistan. (Blank, 2003)

In fact, both countries faced a serious challenge from the threat of Wahhabi extremism, especially from Afghanistan. Thus, the two states welcomed the Taliban's downfall in October 2001 and made Afghanistan's reconstruction and stability a common, critical goal. India and Iran have since established working groups on terrorism and counter-narcotics; both of these initiatives focus on al-Qaeda. Additionally, the two countries have also continued to work to counter Sunni militant threats in the region and have expressed mutual preference for a comprehensive convention against international terrorism at the United Nations. (Dormandy & Desai, 2008)

Another area of regional cooperation between the two countries is the expanding of the North-South corridor in Central Asia. Although India is closer to the Central Asian supply chain, and



potentially could be the biggest consumer of Central Asian oil and gas, it currently has no foothold in the region. When it comes to Indian energy security and energy transportation from the Caspian Sea region, the importance of Iran's role becomes undeniable. Iran not only controls the Strait of Hormuz but also has direct access to both eastern and western areas of the energy rich Caspian Sea region. The Iranian route, therefore, is the easiest and cheapest gateway for Central Asian oil and gas. It would travel some 1,300 kilometers (over 800 miles) through Iran to its warm water ports of Jask and Chabahar in the Gulf of Oman. (Sud, June 17, 2008) India already has a foothold in the Iranian port of Chabahar, which it has helped develop into a commercial port with access to both Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan as a transit point for Indian goods and services.

The turning point for Indo-Iranian regional cooperation was an agreement, signed in 2000, committing both countries to establishing a North-South trade corridor. The corridor stretches from ports in India across the Arabian Sea to the southern Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, where goods then transit Iran and the Caspian Sea to ports in Russia's sector of the Caspian Sea. From there, the route stretches along the Volga River via Moscow to northern Europe. (Spector, 2002)

India also welcomed Iran's inclusion as an observer state in the regional organization SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and both countries joined Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as observers in 2005. Cooperation on regional security issues has largely centered on the conflict in Afghanistan and violence in Pakistan. At a March 2009 SCO summit held in Moscow, Iran, India, and Russia discussed options to contain the Taliban in Afghanistan. (China View, 2009)

Economically, India and Iran have improved their bilateral commercial relations during the past two decades. Their economic and commercial ties have traditionally been buoyed by Indian imports



of Iranian crude oil to help feed energy needs, generated by the country's rapid development. India is one of the largest purchasers of Iranian crude oil. It imported about 22 million tons of crude oil valued at about \$10 billion in 2009, which makes it the third largest market for Iranian crude. India-Iran trade in 2009-10 was valued at \$13.4 billion (Indian exports \$1.9 billion and imports \$11.5 billion) (Indian Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2011). On the other hand, about 40% of the refined oil consumed by Iran is imported from India. (Christian Science Monitor, 2009; Kronstadt & Katzman, 2006)

In exchange for Iranian gas, India has invested in Iran's ports and energy infrastructure. The two countries are in talks to set up a number of projects such as development of the Farsi oil and gas blocks, South Pars gas field and LNG project. India's biggest quest to secure energy resources overseas has been most successful in Iran, where the Indian Oil Corporation, a state-run company, reached a January 2005 agreement with the Iranian firm Petropars to develop a gas block in the gigantic South Pars gas field, home to the world's largest gas reserves.

The Chabahar container terminal project and Chabahar-Faraj-Bam railway project are some other aspects of the bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Situated on the Makran Coast of the Sistan and Baluchestan province of Iran, Chabahar is officially designated as a Free Trade and Industrial Zone by the Iranian government. India is providing assistance in developing the port, which will provide access to the oil and gas resources in Iran and the Central Asian states. Chabahar is seen as a project by the Indian government as a response to the challenge posed by the Chinese, who are building the Gwadar Port in Pakistani Baluchistan. (Siddigui, 2010) Both countries have also set up joint ventures such as the Irano-Hind Shipping Company, the Madras Fertilizer Company and the Chennai Refinery. India has also obtained stakes in the development of Iran's largest onshore oilfield, Yadavaran, as well as the Jufair oilfield. (Srivastava, 2008)



A major part of the India-Iran energy cooperation is the proposed construction of a gas pipeline from Iran to India via Pakistan (IPI), which would provide India with a steady source of Iranian natural gas. Since the discovery of natural gas reserves in Iran's South Pars field in 1988, the Iranian government began increasing efforts to promote gas exports. The prospects for profit are especially high in South Asian countries like India and Pakistan, where natural gas reserves are low and energy demand exceeds supply.

India signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Iran on the construction of the pipeline as far back as 1993. In 1995, Pakistan and Iran also signed a preliminary agreement for the construction of a natural gas pipeline linking the Iranian South Pars natural gas field in the Persian Gulf with Karachi, Pakistan's main industrial port located at the Arabian Sea. The plan calls for a roughly 1,700-mile, 5.4-Bcf/d pipeline. Iran later proposed an extension of the pipeline from Pakistan to India. The pipeline would run 2,775 kilometers from Iran's South Pars gas field through Khuzdar in Pakistan, with one branch reaching Multan and another Karachi. From Multan, the pipeline would extend into India. This pipeline could potentially transfer 150 million metric standard cubic meters per day (mmscmd); 60 mmscmd to Pakistan and the rest to India (Mostashari, 2007).

The pipeline has been referred to as the "peace pipeline" because creating economic linkages between India and Pakistan is likely to encourage more stable relations between the two historical foes, which have fought three wars since their independence in 1947 and experienced two military crises in the past decade. Initially, the Indian government was reluctant to enter into any agreement with Pakistan due to the historically tense relationship between the two neighbors. As an alternative, India suggested the development of a deep-sea pipeline where no threat to natural gas transit would exist. (Chaudhary, 2000) However, the overland route was eventually



chosen because it would be four times cheaper than the deep-sea route, even after including transit fee payments to Pakistan. (Luft, 2005) Finally, in February 1999, a preliminary agreement between Iran and India was signed. (Chaudhary, 2010)

The pipeline talks stalled in 1999–2003 because of Indo–Pakistani tensions, but they regained some momentum in 2004–2005 after New Delhi and Islamabad started a bilateral dialogue process. (Cohen & Curtis, 2008) In 2005, Pakistan and India agreed to pursue this project as a straightforward purchase of Iranian gas at the Indian border with a supplementary agreement between Iran and Pakistan covering the supply of gas to Pakistan and its transit to India. (Ahmad, 2006) In June 2005, India and Iran also reached a \$22 billion deal to export 5 million tons of Iranian LNG to India per year beginning in 2009.

One of the most significant provisions of the New Delhi Declaration sought to upgrade defense cooperation significantly between the two countries. Iran has joined the Indian Navy’s annual initiative, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, which provides a forum for the navies of Indian Ocean littoral states to engage with each other, and plans are afoot for greater maritime cooperation. In November 2009, India held discussions on the expansion of military cooperation with Iran. Improved military relations would include Indian training of Iranian troops, satellite services, and joint naval exercises in the Persian Gulf. (The Bulletin, 2009) Previous military interaction included the training of personnel from the Iranian military by India’s Institute of Military Law in Kamptee; the training has been in place since 2008. (Fars News Agency, 2008)

This defense relationship, however, remains not only sporadic and tentative, but is also circumscribed by India’s growing defense links with Israel. (Pant, 2008) Expectations that India would assist Iran in upgrading its Russian-made defense systems have also not been realized. (Dormandy & Desai, 2008)



### III. The Impediments to Indo-Iranian Relations

The 9/11 attacks in the United States gradually changed the context in which Indo-Iranian relations had previously operated. South Asia was suddenly brought to fore within the broader context of the global “War on Terror”, causing considerable concern in both India and Iran. India watched Washington resuscitate its relationship with Islamabad; while Iran witnessed the United States dramatically expand its military footprint in the region by invading Afghanistan and Iraq.

The U.S. also increased its pressure to bring Iran's nuclear energy program to a halt and encouraged other major powers to consider it as a threat against international security. In order to isolate Iran because of its nuclear energy program, the United States has expressed strong opposition to the proposed India-Pakistan-Iran pipeline, which would give Iran an economic advantage and increase its leverage and influence in South Asia.

Surely, the Indo-American nuclear deal was conditional on India supporting the U.S. on the Iran issue. The two sides signed a deal which bestows legitimacy on India's nuclear capability, unsurpassed by no other state outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The U.S.-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act (also known as the Hyde Act), signed in December 2006, contained a “Statement of Policy” which included clauses designed to ensure India's support for U.S. policies regarding the Iranian nuclear issue. In particular, India was “to dissuade, isolate, and if necessary, sanction and contain Iran for its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, including a nuclear weapons capability and the capability to enrich uranium or reprocess nuclear fuel and the means to deliver weapons of mass destruction.”

Although this section of the Hyde Act generated considerable domestic opposition in India, U.S. President Bush, while signing the Act, emphasized that his administration would interpret this provision as merely “advisory” (Baker, 2006). U.S. officials also continue to



remind India and Pakistan that U.S. legislation sanctions any company investing more than \$20 million annually in Iran's oil and gas industry. Consequently, the IPI project and all other Iranian projects to supply India with energy have been beset by multiple problems which have frequently been compounded due to the effects of the U.S.-led pressure on Iran's trade and foreign investment in Iran.

Initially, both India and Pakistan declared their intentions to go ahead with the project. "This is between us, India is not a client state" Manmohan Singh, the Indian premier reacted. However, New Delhi lately seems to have given in to American pressure. A change in the Indian stance regarding the IPI pipeline has recently been visible. During his visit to the United States in 2005, Singh made several statements to illustrate this fact: "Only preliminary discussions have taken place (on the pipeline). We are terribly short of energy supplies and we desperately need new sources of energy." (Maleki, 2007)

While Singh supported South-South energy cooperation at the 50th anniversary of the Afro-Asian Conference in Jakarta in April 2005, saying "While our continents include both major producers and consumers of energy, the framework within which we produce and consume energy is determined elsewhere" and called the role of Western governments and companies, "an anomaly" in an interview with the Washington Post. He also raised doubts about the viability and bankability of the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline project: "There are many risks, considering all the uncertainties of the situation there in Iran. I don't know if any international consortium of bankers could underwrite this". (The Economic Times, 2005)

In reality, as of 2006, and despite American opposition, the World Bank and Japan's Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation showed an interest in bankrolling the pact. Beyond that, Australia's BHP, Petronas, Total and the Iranian National Gas Company expressed interest in building this pipeline. (Zeb, 2005) Meanwhile, Gazprom was also ready to help finance or even manage it as well since Russian President Vladimir Putin approved this deal and the





Pakistani government also approved the possibility of Gazprom financing and/or constructing the pipeline. (Interfax, 2006; ITAR-TASS, 2006; Srivastava, 2007; Alexander's Gas & Oil Connection, 2007)

Some analysts even advocated extending the IPI pipeline to China, to tie Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran together in a major project having significant strategic implications as well as a huge number of consumers. (Aneja, 2007)

On the other hand, many members of the U.S. Congress continued to demand that Washington should make the nuclear deal with New Delhi conditional on India ending all military cooperation Iran. They cited a visit by Iranian naval vessels in June 2006 to the Indian port of Kochi for five days of joint exercises, which included training of Iranian cadets, as an example of activities that needed to cease. (Raghuvanshi, 2007)

The issues related to Iran's nuclear energy program are complex for Indo—Iranian relations. New Delhi and Tehran have long held significantly different perceptions of the global nuclear order. Iran was not supportive of the Indian nuclear tests in 1998 and backed the UN Security Council Resolution asking India and Pakistan to cap their nuclear capabilities by signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Iran has repeatedly called for the universal ratification of the NPT, much to India's chagrin. Although Iran has claimed that this was directed at Israel, the implications of such a stance are far-reaching for India. With the conclusion of the U.S.—India nuclear deal, Iran warned that the pact endangered the NPT and would trigger new “crises” for the international community. (The Hindu, 2008; Pant, 2008)

On the other hand, despite close relations and convergence of interests with Iran, India voted against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency, which took Iran by surprise. Although India has stated that it supports Iran's development of nuclear technology



for peaceful purposes, it believes that Iran should comply with the restrictions of the NPT as it is a signatory to it. Nevertheless, India's government has made it clear that it does not wish to see the emergence of a new regional power possessing nuclear weapons. (Farrar-Wellman, 2010)

The vote remained a contentious issue between Iran and India for some time, but regular dialogue has helped to overcome it (Siddigui, 2010). Although India voted to take the issue of Iran's enrichment activities to the UN Security Council, it has since repeatedly insisted on a peaceful resolution to the conflict and stated it will not support any threats of violence made against Iran for its nuclear program.

The IPI project has encountered numerous obstacles, not all of them due to American obstacles in its path. Of particular concern is the 475 miles of pipeline through Baluchistan, one of the poorest and most unstable of Pakistan's provinces. This remote region is home to separatist tribes that employ private militias that fight over territory and resources, conditions that are hardly conducive to secure energy transportation. (Roul, 2007)

India has also been cautious about pursuing the pipeline, given its concern that Pakistan could use it as economic leverage against India. In fact, the community of Indian strategists has never been in favor of the pipeline proposal, as in its opinion, it gives Pakistan too much leverage over India's energy security. (Pant, 2008) Islamabad could threaten to cut off the supply if it is dissatisfied with India's policy regarding Kashmir or some other bilateral issues, similar to what Russia has repeatedly done in its bilateral relations with Ukraine and a number of other Eastern European states. (Cohen, 2007)

Although much has been written about the growing defense ties between India and Iran, India has a more substantive defense relationship with the Arab world. India and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf enjoy strong cultural, economic and military ties. The presence of more than five million Indian laborers in Arab countries -



three million of whom are to be found in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates - and more than \$25 billion worth of Arab-India trade, including 60% of Indian oil imports, are the main reasons that give Indian foreign policy a pragmatic approach.

Nowadays, Saudi Arabia is the chief supplier of oil to India's booming economy, and India is now the fourth largest recipient of Saudi oil after China, the United States, and Japan. India has also invested in a refinery and a petrochemicals project in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, India's state-owned energy firm, Oil and Energy Gas Corporation, is engaged with Saudi Arabia as its equity partner for a refinery project in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Saudi King Abdullah and Prime Minister Singh signed an Indo—Saudi "Delhi Declaration" during the Saudi king's 2006 visit which calls for a wide-ranging partnership, including rapid increase of energy and economic cooperation and cooperation against terrorism. (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2006)

New Delhi is also seeking partnership with Riyadh for strategic reasons. To Indian strategists, any ally that can act as a counterweight to Pakistan in the Islamic world is significant. Initially, New Delhi sought to develop security ties with Tehran, but such efforts stumbled in recent years. (Pant, 2008) Indeed, the Iranian nuclear energy program has helped to draw New Delhi and Riyadh closer together. (Farrar-Wellman, 2010)

Furthermore, India's trade and energy security is inextricably linked to the security of the Strait of Hormuz. With this in mind, the Indian Navy regularly visits Persian Gulf ports and conducts joint exercises with other states in the region, thereby lending its hand to Indian diplomacy in expanding New Delhi's reach in the region.

As part of a 48-day tour of the Persian Gulf region in 2008, the Indian Navy made port calls and conducted exercises with the navies of Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. It also used this opportunity to engage with the navies of other major powers involved in the region, such as the United States,



the United Kingdom, and France.

India has also cultivated close security ties with major GCC countries. The defense cooperation agreements that India has with these states are similar to the ones it has with the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, and Japan. India and the UAE have decided to streamline their defense relationship, which has been largely dominated by naval ship visits and training exchange programs. Now, the focus is shifting to possibly joint development and manufacture of sophisticated military hardware. (Kumar, 2002)

Defense cooperation between India and Qatar is also extensive and involves training of military personnel, joint exercises, and service-to-service information sharing. Dialogue is underway between India and Oman for the sultanate to provide berthing facilities for Indian warships deployed in the region. (Pant, 2008)

India also has maritime security arrangement in place with Oman and Qatar. In 2008, a landmark defense pact was signed, under which India committed its military assets to protect "Qatar from external threats". Qatar remains India's exclusive supplier of natural gas, annually supplying five million tons of LNG to India.

India's efforts to improve its relations with the Middle East are not limited to Iran and the other Persian Gulf states. In the early 1990s, India stepped back from its staunch anti-Israeli stance and support for the Palestinian cause. Besides practical economic and security considerations in the Post-Cold War world, domestic politics - especially those influenced by Hindu nationalists - played a role in this reversal. However, in December 1991, India voted along with the UN majority to repeal the UN resolution equating Zionism with racism and in 1992, following the Soviet Union and China, India established diplomatic relations with Israel.

Israel and India share intelligence on terrorist groups. They have developed close defense and security ties since establishing diplomatic relations in 1992. Israel provided India with the much-needed intelligence on Pakistani positions during the Kargil War in 1999,



which was instrumental in turning the war around for India. (Thapar, 2007) Israel is India's second-biggest arms supplier, after Russia. Israel is also training Indian military units and currently discussing an arrangement to give Indian commandos counter-terrorist and urban warfare training. India's trade with Israel has increased and India has become Israel's second-largest trading partner in Asia, when it comes to non-military goods and services.

While India and Israel were officially "rivals" during the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism have generated a solid strategic alliance. (Sherman, 2006) However, India still cannot ignore the sentiments of its Muslim minority of about 150 million which has deep religious roots and attachment with Islamic holy places. India's growing relationships with Israel and the United States and the domestic criticism it has engendered have prompted India to reinforce its ties with the Muslim world. (Times of India, 2003)

On the other hand, India's ties with Iran complicate its burgeoning relations with Israel: Iran is keen to expand its relations with the most important country in the sub-continent and this policy generates serious concerns for Israel about India's foreign policy toward the West Asian region. Additionally, although Iran has welcomed a more sound Indian presence in the Persian Gulf region, comprehensive military cooperation between India and Iran's regional rivals cannot be tolerated by the government in Tehran.

#### **IV. The Reactions to the Transformation of India's Policy toward Iran**

India's shift in policy toward Iran created a furor in the Communist Party and other leftist parties on whose votes Prime Minister Singh's Congress Party-led coalition relies for a parliamentary majority. These parties objected to India's IAEA votes. They argued that the government was abandoning its autonomy on foreign policy and becoming subservient to Washington. The nationalist Bharatiya Janata



Party also accused the government of betraying Iran and “capitulating” to the United States. Top Indian policymakers have tried to quell the criticism by arguing that India voted in its own national interest. They have also pointed out that India is not alone: both Russia and China, Iran’s strongest backers, also voted for the resolution to refer Iran to the UN Security Council over its nuclear file. The Communists, however, have not given up their criticism.

In November 2006, after India’s vote against Iran at the IAEA took Tehran by surprise, a “hurt” Ali Larijani – then secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council - was reported as saying: “India was our friend”. (Tehran Times, 2009) Tehran signaled its anger over India's votes against the Iranian nuclear energy program at IAEA meetings on repeated occasions. At the same time, a former Iranian deputy oil minister, Hadi Nejad-Hosseini, questioned the natural gas deal between Iran and India on the ground that it gave a huge discount to India and was some 30% below the value of gas sold to Turkey. (Maleki, 2007) Also, then Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, expressed his country’s disappointment to his Indian counterpart Somanahalli Mallaiah Krishna over India’s vote in favor of the resolutions by the IAEA regarding Tehran’s nuclear energy program. In a letter, Mottaki drew parallels between Iran’s nuclear energy program and India’s nuclear tests. Krishna, however, responded by saying that the two cases lack similarity and that India’s non-proliferation record is free from blemishes. (Indian Express, 2009)

Under these circumstances, Prime Minister Singh took the step of explaining India’s vote in a formal statement to parliament. He argued that Iran had undertaken international obligations voluntarily—both the obligations it has as a member of the NPT and its decision to suspend its sensitive nuclear activities—and should abide by its commitments. He also noted concerns about the origins of gas centrifuges, a thinly veiled reference to Pakistan. (Mitra & Hate, 2006)



Iran's position on several other issues crucial to India has run counter to Indian interests. Tehran has been critical of the way the Indian government has handled protests in Kashmir, and the Indian government has been forced to issue a demarche, protesting against Iranian interference in Indian domestic issues. (Samanta, 2010; Jahan News, 2010)

However, as of May 2009, India officially announced its decision to remain noncommittal in the IPI project due to a combination of factors, including price disputes with Pakistan, anti-Iranian pressure from the United States, security concerns, and the possibility of less expensive domestic alternatives. The Indian government's 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan also does not project any gas supply from this route. (EIA, 2010) On the other hand, in June 2009, India's Reliance Industries halted gasoline exports to Iran to avoid possible restriction on sales in the United States, which has increased pressure on companies selling gasoline to Iran. (Reuters, 2009)

Consequently, that same month, Iran and Pakistan signed a deal to begin construction of a natural gas pipeline without India's participation. (Outlook India, 2009) As it runs out of time and options, Iran is looking to China as a possible end consumer of the Iran-Pakistan pipeline. Iranian Foreign Minister announced that, in lieu of cooperation from New Delhi, China is keen to join the Pakistan-Iran project. (Farrar-Wellman, 2010; One India, 2010; Siddharth, 2010)

### **Conclusion**

During recent decades, India and Iran have described their relationship as a "civilizational" and "historical" one, dating back thousands of years. New Delhi and Tehran have strengthened their ties and found common ground for cultural, economic and strategic cooperation. However, over time, the basis for the relations between Iran and India has shifted from being civilizational to economic.

Nowadays, the Indian government is aware that Iran is looking



to improve bilateral relations with India, and the economic relations between the two would go a long way in helping India grow as an economic, political and regional power. The key element at present and for the future in India's relationship with Iran is likely to remain energy. Planned oil and natural gas pipelines outline a paradigm of South-South economic cooperation and political solidarity. Clearly, India is interested in increasing its presence in the Iranian energy sector because of its rapidly rising energy needs, and is rightfully feeling restless about its own marginalization in Iran. Not only has Pakistan signed a pipeline deal with Tehran, but China is also starting to make its presence felt.

Regarding its policy towards Iran, India is also, however, aware of the need to work in a manner that its national interests are not harmed. The biggest area of difference between Iran and India is likely to be Tehran's nuclear energy program. India has categorically stated that a nuclear-armed Iran is not acceptable, although New Delhi has not made clear how exactly it will prevent Iran from acquiring the capacity to build an atomic weapon.

On the other hand, the predominant player in the Persian Gulf remains the United States. India's ties with the United States have dramatically expanded in the last few years, and this has already emerged as a significant factor shaping Indian foreign policy toward the Persian Gulf. The most visible manifestation of this has been India's attempt to recalibrate its ties with Iran. The shadow of the United States will loom large over Indian foreign policy in the years to come, especially if the conflict between the United States and Iran intensifies. It is also in India's interest that nuclear proliferation in its neighborhood is contained.

It is valuable to assert that the cultural differences between South and West Asian countries are not only rooted in racial, religious or linguistic differentiations. In fact, the different mentalities in the political structures of these societies also play a significant role in forming a contradiction in their interests. Thus, it seems that the most





important gap between the two sides can be found in their different discourse and perceptions about the new structure of the international system and its necessities. Certainly, the main outcome of this gap is that achieving a functional policy to improve relations has become difficult.

However, in a globalized world where "security" on both international and unit levels is a "collective" matter in a new framework of global society; bilateral relations with no concern for the replacement of the "nation-state" with the new order of "state-international community" are not sufficient to guarantee national security. Based on this new world order, nations tend to be more concerned about states that are geographically proximate to their vital resources and lines of communication, reflecting the realist logic. Changes of governments, coups, military exercises, internal conflicts, instability, border disputes, nuclear explosions, and the like in nearby states and regions such as the Persian Gulf region can therefore be of concern to India.

It is also noteworthy that India's strategic culture is an amalgamation of its history and civilization, which have witnessed different groups of people representing various customs, languages, and religions settling down in the subcontinent. In this regard, the most significant policy to improve India's relations with Iran can be based on two levels.

At a micro level, India's emphasis on the common cultural and historical heritage between the Indian and Persian Civilizations could increase the role of India as a bridge between the two different dominant discourses in Iran and in the international community.

With respect to these realities, India, relying on its cultural and civilizational background and based on its historical relations with Iran, can play a decisive role in the process of linking the political, cultural and economic principles of this country to the globalized values of the international community. Therefore, the quest for proximity of sovereignty patterns on both sides can strengthen



economic cooperation and increase economic security, especially in the field of production and transformation of strategic commodities such as oil and natural gas.

In fact, India and Iran's proactive interaction with the international community can lead to the development of a collective security approach in the fields of energy security and economic cooperation. From this point of view, in contrast with China's energy policies in Iran, India could focus on structural adjustments in relations with Iran to create a common identity as a basis for cooperation.

## Notes

- Another way for India to access Central Asian oil would be the Iranian port of Neka in the Caspian Sea. Kazakhstan delivers oil to the Neka terminal today to further blend and swap it with Iranian oil
- A road to connect Afghanistan to Chabahar has already been completed with Indian assistance.
- Moscow's interest in the IPI pipeline dates back to 1995, when Gazprom and the Gas Authority of India signed a memorandum of understanding on constructing the pipeline. (Rediff.com, 2002) In addition to influencing Iranian decision making, Moscow has shown interest in the project both as a contractor and as an investor. (Bhadrakumar, 2007)
- Indian naval warships have also been deployed in the Gulf of Aden to carry out anti-piracy patrols on the route usually followed by Indian commercial vessels between Salalah (Oman) and Aden (Yemen). The Gulf of Aden is a strategic choke point in the Indian Ocean and provides access to the Suez Canal, through which a sizeable portion of India's trade flows.
- In November 2010, Iran's Supreme Leader issued a message to Hajj pilgrims in which he called upon Muslims worldwide to support the Kashmiri people in India's Jammu and Kashmir. This message came at a time when Kashmiri youths were protesting against human rights violations by Indian security forces. In his message, the Iranian leader noted that the need for solidarity with the Kashmiri people is "a great obligation" upon the Muslim Ummah. (Jahan News, November 21, 2010)

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