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India West Asia Relations in a Changing Iran: Implications of a Post-Islamic Regime

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Abstract: The potential transformation of Iran's political system following a post-Islamic regime transition presents a significant turning point for India–West Asia relations. This study explores how such a structural shift in Iran could reshape regional geopolitics, energy markets, and strategic alignments, thereby influencing India's foreign policy priorities. India's engagement with West Asia has historically been shaped by civilizational linkages, energy dependence, diaspora presence, trade partnerships, and its commitment to strategic autonomy. Any political reconfiguration in Iran would not only affect bilateral relations but also alter the broader balance of power across the Gulf region and the wider West Asian strategic environment.

The research adopts a scenario-based and comparative analytical framework to evaluate possible political trajectories in Iran and their implications for India's economic and security interests. It examines the prospects for renewed diplomatic engagement, easing of sanctions, expansion of energy cooperation, and the revival of connectivity initiatives such as the International North–South Transport Corridor and Chabahar Port. At the same time, it assesses potential risks, including internal instability, regional rivalries, and intensified great-power competition involving the United States, China, and Russia.

The study argues that India's response to a post-Islamic regime Iran would likely be guided by pragmatic considerations rooted in geoeconomics and multipolar diplomacy. By balancing normative principles with strategic interests, India may seek to enhance energy diversification, strengthen regional connectivity, and maintain equilibrium among competing powers. This analysis contributes to contemporary debates on strategic autonomy, emerging multipolarity, and the evolving geopolitical landscape of West Asia.

Keywords: India–West Asia relations; post-Islamic regime Iran; Iran political transition; strategic autonomy; geoeconomics; energy security; Chabahar Port; International North–South Transport Corridor; multipolarity; regional geopolitics; connectivity initiatives; foreign policy strategy.

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India–West Asia Relations: Post-Islamic Regime in Iran

1. Introduction

India's relations with West Asia have historically been one of the most significant components of its foreign policy framework. The region's importance stems from multiple factors including geographical proximity, economic interdependence, civilizational interaction, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. West Asia occupies a strategic position between Asia, Europe, and Africa, making it a central arena for global energy trade and international political competition. For India, the region represents not only a major source of hydrocarbons but also a key destination for trade, investment, and labour migration. Millions of Indian citizens work across Gulf countries, contributing significantly to remittances that support the Indian economy.

Among the countries of West Asia, Iran occupies a distinctive place in India's diplomatic and strategic calculations. Iran's geographical location along the Persian Gulf and its proximity to Central Asia make it a natural partner for India's connectivity and trade ambitions. Additionally, Iran possesses some of the world's largest reserves of oil and natural gas, which historically made it an important energy supplier for India. These economic considerations are complemented by deep cultural and historical linkages that have developed over centuries through trade, migration, language, and intellectual exchange.

However, the nature of India–Iran relations has been shaped significantly by political developments within Iran itself. The establishment of the Islamic Republic following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 represented a turning point in the country's domestic governance and foreign policy orientation. The overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy and the emergence of a revolutionary government under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini transformed Iran's political identity and its engagement with global powers.[1] The new political system combined elements of republican institutions with religious authority, introducing ideological dimensions into the country's international relations.

For India, the transformation of Iran's political system required careful diplomatic recalibration. New Delhi needed to balance its historical ties with Iran against the shifting geopolitical environment characterized by Western sanctions, regional conflicts, and evolving alliances. Despite these challenges, India has consistently pursued a pragmatic policy that emphasizes engagement, dialogue, and economic cooperation with Iran while maintaining strong relations with other major actors in West Asia such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. This balancing strategy reflects India's broader commitment to strategic autonomy in international affairs.

Furthermore, contemporary geopolitical developments—including tensions between Iran and the United States, the emergence of new regional alliances, and shifts in global energy markets—continue to influence India's engagement with West Asia. As a rising global power with expanding economic and strategic interests, India must carefully navigate these complexities while protecting its national interests. Understanding the implications of political developments within Iran is therefore essential for analyzing the broader trajectory of India–West Asia relations.

1. Nikki R. Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 241–276.

2. Historical Overview of India–Iran Relations

India and Iran share a long history of interaction that predates the emergence of modern nation-states. Cultural, economic, and political connections between the Indian subcontinent and Persia developed through centuries of trade, migration, and intellectual exchange. These interactions laid the foundation for contemporary diplomatic relations between the two countries.[2]

Historically, maritime trade routes connecting the western coast of India with ports in the Persian Gulf facilitated the exchange of goods such as spices, textiles, pearls, and precious stones. Indian merchants regularly traveled to Persian ports, while Persian traders visited Indian markets. These commercial networks created sustained economic linkages that contributed to the prosperity of both regions.

Beyond economic interaction, cultural exchange between India and Persia played an important role in shaping intellectual traditions across South Asia. Persian language and literature exerted significant influence on the cultural life of the Indian subcontinent, particularly during the medieval period. Persian became the language of administration in several Indian empires, including the Mughal Empire. As a result, Persian literary traditions, poetry, philosophy, and art flourished in India. These civilizational connections helped create a shared cultural heritage that continues to influence relations between the two societies.

During the twentieth century, diplomatic relations between India and Iran developed within the broader context of international politics and regional security dynamics. Following India's independence in 1947, both countries sought to pursue independent foreign policies while navigating the pressures of the Cold War. Although Iran under the Pahlavi monarchy maintained close relations with Western powers, India and Iran were still able to cultivate cooperative ties based on economic and cultural interests.

Energy cooperation emerged as a particularly important dimension of the relationship. Iran's vast oil reserves made it a valuable partner for India's rapidly expanding economy. Trade agreements and bilateral exchanges strengthened economic interaction, while diplomatic dialogue continued through regional and international forums.

However, the trajectory of bilateral relations underwent significant transformation after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The establishment of the Islamic Republic introduced new ideological and political elements into Iran's foreign policy, influencing its engagement with regional and global actors. Despite these changes, India chose to maintain diplomatic engagement with Iran, reflecting its broader commitment to non-alignment and pragmatic diplomacy.

2. Richard Foltz, Iran in World History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 102–134.

3. Theoretical Frameworks in International Relations

The analysis of India–West Asia relations can benefit from the application of several theoretical perspectives within the field of international relations. These theoretical frameworks help explain the motivations behind state behavior, the dynamics of cooperation and conflict, and the broader patterns of regional politics.

One of the most influential theoretical perspectives is realism, which emphasizes the importance of power, security, and national interests in shaping international relations. According to realist theory, states act primarily to protect their sovereignty and maximize their strategic advantages within an anarchic international system. From this perspective, India's engagement with Iran can be understood as a pragmatic strategy aimed at securing energy supplies, expanding regional influence, and maintaining strategic autonomy.[3]

Liberalism offers an alternative interpretation by emphasizing the role of economic interdependence, institutions, and cooperation in promoting stability among states. Liberal theorists argue that trade, investment, and shared economic interests can reduce the likelihood of conflict by creating mutual benefits for participating countries. The economic partnership between India and Iran—particularly in areas such as energy trade, infrastructure development, and connectivity projects—illustrates these liberal dynamics.

Constructivism, another important theoretical approach, focuses on the role of identity, ideas, and social norms in shaping international relations. Constructivist scholars argue that historical experiences, cultural ties, and shared identities can influence how states perceive each other and define their interests. The long history of civilizational interaction between India and Iran provides a valuable example of how cultural connections can shape diplomatic engagement.

In addition to these major theoretical approaches, the concept of regional balance of power is also useful for understanding the dynamics of West Asian politics. The region is characterized by complex interactions among multiple actors, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and various external powers. Each of these actors seeks to expand its influence while preventing rivals from achieving dominance.

For India, navigating this complex regional environment requires a flexible and pragmatic foreign policy. By maintaining diplomatic relations with multiple actors across West Asia, India seeks to protect its economic interests while avoiding entanglement in regional rivalries. This strategy reflects a broader commitment to maintaining strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar world.

3. Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 79–101.

4. Foreign Policy Orientations: India and Post-Islamic Regime Iran

The foreign policy orientation of Iran following the 1979 revolution reflects a combination of ideological commitment and pragmatic strategic considerations. The revolutionary leadership sought to redefine Iran's role in international politics by rejecting the pro-Western orientation of the previous regime and advocating resistance against foreign domination.[4]

Iran's foreign policy discourse emphasizes themes such as independence, anti-imperialism, and support for oppressed communities across the Muslim world. These ideological elements have shaped Iran's relationships with regional actors and global powers. At the same time, Iranian policymakers have demonstrated pragmatic flexibility in pursuing economic and diplomatic engagement with countries that are willing to cooperate despite political differences.

India's foreign policy approach toward Iran has been guided by its broader doctrine of strategic autonomy. Rather than aligning exclusively with any single bloc or alliance, India seeks to maintain constructive relations with multiple partners simultaneously. This approach allows New Delhi to safeguard its economic interests while avoiding unnecessary geopolitical confrontations.

4. Vali Nasr, The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 67–104.

5. Economic and Energy Dimensions of the Relationship

Economic cooperation forms one of the central pillars of India–Iran relations. Energy trade, infrastructure development, and commercial exchanges have long served as important drivers of bilateral engagement between the two countries.

India's rapidly growing economy requires large and stable supplies of energy to sustain industrial development and economic expansion. As one of the world's largest consumers of energy, India imports a significant portion of its crude oil from West Asia. The region's vast hydrocarbon reserves make it indispensable to India's long-term energy security strategy.[5]

Iran has historically been one of the key suppliers of crude oil to India. Its large reserves of both oil and natural gas provide opportunities for long-term energy cooperation between the two countries. In addition to energy trade, India has explored possibilities for investment in Iran's energy sector, including oil exploration and gas pipeline projects.

However, economic cooperation between India and Iran has often been affected by geopolitical constraints. International sanctions imposed on Iran have limited financial transactions and restricted access to global markets. These sanctions have created obstacles for Indian companies seeking to invest in Iranian energy projects.

Despite these challenges, both countries have continued to explore new avenues for economic collaboration. Infrastructure development, port modernization, and regional connectivity initiatives have emerged as important areas of cooperation. These projects not only strengthen bilateral economic relations but also contribute to broader regional integration.

5. Harsh V. Pant, Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 132–158.

6. Strategic Infrastructure: Chabahar Port and Connectivity

One of the most significant examples of India–Iran cooperation in recent years is the development of the Chabahar Port located in southeastern Iran along the Gulf of Oman. The project holds major strategic significance for India's regional connectivity strategy and broader geopolitical objectives.[6]

Chabahar provides India with direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without relying on transit routes through Pakistan. This alternative route is particularly important given the historical tensions between India and Pakistan, which have often limited cross-border trade and transportation. By investing in the development of Chabahar Port, India aims to establish a reliable corridor for trade and economic interaction with landlocked regions of Central Asia.

The port is also connected to the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multi-modal transportation network linking India with Russia, Central Asia, and Europe through Iran. This corridor has the potential to reduce transportation costs and travel time for goods moving between these regions, thereby enhancing economic integration across Eurasia.

Nevertheless, the development of Chabahar has faced several challenges. International sanctions on Iran, financial constraints, and regional security concerns have slowed the pace of infrastructure development. Despite these obstacles, India continues to view the project as a cornerstone of its long-term strategic engagement with Iran and the broader West Asian region.

6. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, India–Iran Joint Statements, various years.

7. Security and Geopolitical Challenges

The geopolitical landscape of West Asia is characterized by persistent instability, competing regional ambitions, and the involvement of external powers. These dynamics significantly influence India's foreign policy calculations in the region. As a country with expanding economic interests and a large diaspora in West Asia, India must carefully manage its relationships with multiple actors while avoiding entanglement in regional rivalries.

Iran plays a prominent role in the security dynamics of the Middle East. Its regional policies are shaped by a combination of ideological motivations, security concerns, and strategic ambitions. Iran has developed alliances with various political and non-state actors across the region, particularly in countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. These relationships have strengthened Iran's regional influence but have also intensified tensions with rival powers, including Saudi Arabia and Israel.[7]

For India, maintaining balanced relations with competing actors in the region presents a complex diplomatic challenge. On the one hand, Iran remains an important partner for energy cooperation and regional connectivity initiatives such as the Chabahar Port project. On the other hand, India

has deepened its strategic partnerships with countries such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies, particularly in areas such as defense cooperation, trade, and investment.

Another significant challenge arises from the international sanctions imposed on Iran by Western powers. These sanctions have periodically disrupted economic engagement between India and Iran by limiting banking channels, investment opportunities, and energy imports.

Despite these constraints, India has consistently emphasized diplomacy, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution as guiding principles of its West Asia policy. This approach reflects India's broader commitment to maintaining stability in a region that is critical for its economic and strategic interests.

7. International Crisis Group, Iran's Regional Policy Report (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2020).

8. India's West Asia Policy: Post-2014 Strategic Pivot

India's approach toward West Asia has undergone significant evolution in recent years, particularly after 2014. Recognizing the growing strategic importance of the region, India introduced a more proactive diplomatic framework aimed at strengthening political, economic, and security partnerships with key regional actors.[8]

One of the central elements of this strategy is the "Link West Policy," which complements India's broader "Act East Policy." Through this initiative, India seeks to expand its engagement with countries across West Asia in areas such as energy cooperation, infrastructure development, technology transfer, and defense collaboration.

Diplomatic outreach has played a crucial role in this policy shift. High-level visits by Indian leaders to countries in the Gulf region have strengthened bilateral relations and opened new avenues for economic cooperation. Agreements covering investment, infrastructure development, and security cooperation have been signed with several regional partners.

At the same time, India has continued to maintain diplomatic engagement with Iran despite the challenges posed by sanctions and geopolitical tensions. This balanced approach reflects India's recognition that West Asia is not a monolithic region but rather a complex geopolitical space characterized by diverse political systems and strategic interests.

8. C. Raja Mohan, Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2015), pp. 89–120.

9. Regional Security Complex and India's Role

West Asia represents one of the most volatile regions in the international system due to its complex security environment and ongoing conflicts. Political instability, sectarian divisions, and geopolitical rivalries have created a regional security complex in which developments in one country often have far-reaching implications for neighboring states.[9]

Several major conflicts have shaped the region's security dynamics over the past decades. These include tensions between Iran and Israel, the civil war in Syria, the conflict in Yemen, and broader competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional influence. These conflicts not only affect regional stability but also influence global energy markets and international diplomacy.

India's role within this security complex is primarily that of a diplomatic partner advocating peaceful resolution of disputes. India has consistently emphasized the importance of dialogue, negotiation, and international cooperation in addressing regional conflicts.

Another important factor influencing India's policy is the presence of a large Indian diaspora across the Gulf region. Millions of Indian workers reside in countries such as the United Arab

Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. Ensuring the safety and well-being of these communities is a key priority for the Indian government.

9. Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 187–230.

10. Cultural and Soft Power Linkages

In addition to economic and strategic cooperation, cultural diplomacy plays an important role in strengthening India–Iran relations. The historical interactions between the two civilizations have created enduring cultural linkages that continue to influence contemporary relations.[10]

Persian literature, poetry, and philosophy have had a profound impact on intellectual traditions in the Indian subcontinent. Classical Persian poets such as Hafez, Saadi, and Rumi were widely studied and admired in India. Their works influenced literary traditions and contributed to the development of Indo-Persian cultural heritage.

Similarly, Indian culture has also influenced Iranian society through historical trade and intellectual exchange. Artistic traditions, architectural styles, and culinary practices reflect centuries of interaction between the two regions.

In modern times, cultural diplomacy initiatives have helped revive these historical connections. Academic exchange programs, cultural festivals, and translation projects contribute to greater mutual understanding between Indian and Iranian societies.

10. Richard Foltz, Iran in World History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 102–134.

11. Comparative Bilateral Relations within West Asia

India's foreign policy in West Asia is characterized by engagement with multiple regional actors simultaneously. Rather than aligning exclusively with any single country or alliance, India seeks to maintain balanced relations with all major powers in the region.

In recent years, India has significantly strengthened its partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These relationships are driven by economic cooperation, energy trade, and investment opportunities. Gulf countries have also emerged as important investors in India's infrastructure and technology sectors.

India has also developed a strong strategic partnership with Israel, particularly in areas such as defense technology, agriculture, and cybersecurity. Israel has become one of India's key defense suppliers, and cooperation between the two countries has expanded significantly over the past two decades.

The expansion of these partnerships inevitably influences India's relationship with Iran. While India continues to value its historical ties with Tehran, it must carefully balance its diplomatic engagements to avoid tensions among regional partners.[11]

11. Frederic Wehrey, Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 91–129.

12. Constraints, Opportunities, and Policy Recommendations

Despite the long history of cooperation between India and Iran, several structural constraints continue to limit the full potential of bilateral relations. International sanctions remain one of the most significant obstacles to economic collaboration. Restrictions on financial transactions and investment flows have made it difficult for companies to engage in large-scale projects.

Geopolitical rivalries within West Asia also create uncertainties that affect long-term planning. Competition among regional powers often complicates diplomatic engagement and increases the risk of conflict.

Nevertheless, significant opportunities remain for expanding cooperation between India and Iran. Energy trade continues to offer potential benefits for both countries, particularly as global demand for energy resources continues to grow. Infrastructure projects such as Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor provide additional avenues for economic collaboration.

In order to strengthen bilateral relations, policymakers in both countries may consider several strategies. First, diplomatic dialogue should be intensified to address emerging geopolitical challenges. Second, economic cooperation could be expanded through alternative financial mechanisms that reduce the impact of sanctions. Third, cultural and academic exchanges should be strengthened to promote mutual understanding between societies.[12]

12. Ashley J. Tellis, India's Emerging Strategy in Asia (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), pp. 73–101.

13. Conclusion

India–Iran relations represent a multifaceted partnership shaped by historical ties, economic interests, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. The relationship has developed through centuries of cultural interaction and has adapted to major political transformations in both countries.

The emergence of the Islamic Republic in Iran introduced new ideological dimensions into regional politics, creating both challenges and opportunities for India's foreign policy. Despite these complexities, India has consistently pursued a pragmatic and balanced approach toward engagement with Iran.

Economic cooperation, energy trade, and infrastructure development remain central pillars of the bilateral relationship. Projects such as the Chabahar Port initiative demonstrate the strategic importance of Iran for India's regional connectivity ambitions.

At the same time, India must carefully navigate a complex geopolitical environment characterized by competing alliances, international sanctions, and ongoing conflicts within West Asia. Maintaining balanced relations with multiple regional actors will remain essential for safeguarding India's national interests.

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