

VOLUME 29, ISSUE 1, JANUARY - MARCH, 2022

ISSN 0972-5563

---

# Journal of Peace Studies

---

ISSN 0972-5563

Journal of Peace Studies

VOLUME 29, ISSUE 1, JANUARY - MARCH, 2022



---

PUBLISHED BY INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR PEACE STUDIES

---

# Journal of Peace Studies

---

**FOUNDER EDITOR**

LATE PROF. RIYAZ PUNJABI

**EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD**

T. K. OOMMEN  
SALEEM KIDWAI  
RENÉ WADLOW

**EDITORIAL BOARD**

G. BALACHANDRAN  
NOOR A. BABA  
AJAY DARSHAN BEHERA

**EDITOR (HONY)**

ASHOK BEHURIA

**CONSULTING EDITOR (HONY)**

SMRUTI S. PATTANAİK

**ASST. EDITOR**

PRATEEK JOSHI

**DESIGN**

BRINDA DATTA

**PRINTED & PUBLISHED BY**

SHEIKH KHALID JEHANGIR

International Centre for Peace Studies

C-11 Jangpura Extension

New Delhi - 110 014

Tel: (91-11) 49989230, +91-9810317972

<http://www.icpsnet.org>

<http://www.icpsorg.com>

Email: [cpsndjps@gmail.com](mailto:cpsndjps@gmail.com);

**Printed at:**

A.M. Offsetters

Kotla Mubarakpur, New Delhi

PIN- 110 003, TEL: 2463 2395

---

**OVERSEAS OFFICES**

---

**UNITED STATES**

7541 N.WESTERN AVENUE  
CHICAGO,  
IL 60645-1510, USA

**UNITED KINGDOM**

196 CHURCH ROAD  
NORTHOLT, MIDDX  
UB5 5AE U.K.  
PHONE: 0181-845, 8828

**In India**

Single Copy: Rs. 200.00

Annual  
(Individual) Rs. 800.00  
(Institutional) Rs. 1600.00

**Overseas (Air Mail)**

Single Copy: US\$ 7.50  
UK£4.50

Annual: US\$ 45.00  
UK£30.00

# Journal of Peace Studies

## C O N T E N T S

### FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

The War in Ukraine must end 1

### ARTICLES

Iran Factor in India's Afghanistan Policy *Rajan Jha & Jita Mishra* 5

Re-Linking the Landlocked Countries: India's Connectivity Initiatives and Options for Nepal and Bhutan *Nihar R Nayak* 26

### OPINION

Tawang - Trashigang Corridor to boost development in India's Eastern Border Space *Jajati K. Pattnaik* 44

### BOOK REVIEW

Development, Governance and Gender in South Asia – Perspectives Issues and Challenges by Anisur Rahman & Niharika Tiwari Reivewed by *Ghulam Mustafa* 59

---

---

## Iran as a Factor in India's Policy towards Afghanistan

---

**Rajan Jha & Jita Mishra \***

**Abstract**

*Indias relations with Afghanistan are at its most critical phase ever. The US withdrawal has strengthened the position of its arch enemy Pakistan and it is left with no credible external friends there after most of them shut down their embassies and left the country following the Taliban takeover. Iran, given its historic and cultural links with Afghanistan, can play a positive role for India in these changed circumstances. It has been critical of Indias policy towards Afghanistan and Central Asia for a long time. Due to Indias closeness to the US in the last two decades, there has emerged a perceptible gap between the two countries, especially because the continuing tensions in Iran-US relations. Iran has come closer to China, partly to deal with the hostility shown by the US and it feels that there is a greater need to collaborate with Pakistan in the region. This has created divergence in the approaches of India and Iran towards the region in general and towards Afghanistan in particular, making cooperation difficult. Nevertheless, Iran has acquired fresh importance for India as a credible gate-way for it to sustain its interest in Afghanistan and the region. However, India has a daunting task ahead to persuade Iran to work closely together for mutual benefit in the region in the times to come. This article discusses the significance of Iranian factor in Indias Afghanistan policy and argues that India should look at the region afresh and recalibrate its policies and approach to retain its influence and sustain its interest in the region. It concludes that the future would depend on the long term strategies to be adopted by both India and Iran on Afghanistan and the overtures India would make to re-inject warmth and urgency into its relations with Iran.*

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, Iran, Taliban, India-Iran relations, US withdrawal, Chabahar, Gateway to Central Asia, Hazara Shia, Connectivity*



The withdrawal of the US-led international forces from Afghanistan and Taliban's coming back to power has weakened India's stand in the south-central Asian region. Given the closeness of relationship between Taliban and Pakistan, India needs to revisit its policies in the region and look for all possible ways in which it can revive and strengthen

*\*Dr. Rajan Jha is Assistant Professor and Dr. Jita Mishra is Associate Professor at Venkateswara College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India.*

its position. In this context, Iran becomes a much more crucial factor in Indian foreign policy than ever before because of its sustained relationship with Afghanistan, which is governed by its own geo-political interests and concerns.

Though interconnectedness among Central Asian States makes it difficult to weigh the influences individual states wield on Afghanistan, it is clear that Iran has a much closer cultural and historical link with Afghanistan than China and even Pakistan. India's hostile relationship with Pakistan makes Iran very useful as a country of passage for India, since it provides an alternative land route for Afghanistan and other Central Asian states. As an analyst would point out, "India's Afghan policy is driven by, and is dependent on, many extraneous factors such as India's troubled relationship with Pakistan, its search for a land transit to Central Asia through Iran and Afghanistan and its concerns regarding use of Afghan territory by Pakistan to the detriment of Indian interests".<sup>1</sup>

Rising ambitions of China in the region, and its closeness to Pakistan makes it pertinent for India to look for a reliable long-term partner in Afghanistan. Given the current geopolitical scenario, when the US has finally withdrawn from

Afghanistan, India can look towards Iran as a partner from a long-term perspective. However, in recent years, Iran and India have not been able to exploit the potential of their cooperation in Afghanistan for several reasons. One of the main reasons is that the Indian policy makers, given the robust relationship India has with the US today and dependence on the US for framing India's policy towards Afghanistan during the last twenty years, do not look beyond the US policies in the region and have not invested their own diplomatic acumen in seeking out a separate, independent policy option for India in the region. The article tries to analyse the factors responsible for non-realization of cooperation between India and Iran over Afghanistan and explore all possible ways through which that relationship can be developed and become a bridge for India's more fruitful engagements with Afghanistan in future.

In order to understand the Iran factor in India's Afghanistan policy it is necessary to follow a brief introduction of the history and geopolitics of the region.

### **Iran and Afghanistan**

In the medieval period, due to circumstances peculiar to that time, most of the territories of today's Iran and Afghanistan were part of the

Persian empire. For a very long time, until the modern era, boundaries between them were not defined. The common history between these two states created a rich web of cross-border family and cultural linkages which persist even today. Despite all the modern developments and attempts at nation building either by independent rulers or under the colonial occupation, those cross-border linkages remain and play a very significant role in deciding the larger geopolitics of the region.

Modern attempts to create coherent borders in both the countries began in the mid-nineteenth century. The Treaty of Paris signed between the Persian Empire and Britain in 1857 transferred the territory of Herat from Persian Empire to the Afghanistan under the watch of the British imperial authority. This resulted in clear demarcation of the 930-kilometer-long border between Afghanistan and Iran for the first time in history in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, despite the creation of a modern border, it could not end the historical cultural and family ties. Links between people and communities straddling the artificial border have survived till date making the borders incoherent and cross-shaping each other's socio-political milieus.

The cultural and political links between Iran and Afghanistan are

based on the use of the Persian language (*Dari* variant of Persian is spoken in Afghanistan) in both countries and the affinities between the Shias of both countries. The Hazaras living largely around the western border of Afghanistan are Shias and speak Persian language and thus are close to Iran culturally than to rest of Afghanistan, which has large Pashto-speaking population and has mostly Sunni Muslims in its southern and eastern parts. Iran has traditionally retained a more cordial relationship with the Hazaras and the Tajiks rather than with the dominant Pashtun leadership in Afghanistan and the status of these minorities is a crucial point of bargain between the governments in both the countries. Though the Hazaras and the Tajiks constitute around 35 percent of Afghan population, they have been able to mark their presence in country's chaotic politics, thanks to their own efforts and also to some extent, due to the backing and support provided by neighbouring Iran. The historical linkage of the Hazaras and Tajiks with Iran, particularly after the Islamic revolution in 1979, has stood the test of time and has served especially the Shias of Afghanistan well. After the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran began to claim spiritual authority over the Islamic world, particularly, the Shias.<sup>2</sup>

There is no denying the fact that consistent Iranian backing of Shias

of Iran has created some kind of a sense of insecurity among the majority Pashtuns, sometimes leading to political and cultural persecution of the minorities. It has also pushed the majority communities in Afghanistan to find allies in the region. Taliban's closeness to Pakistan is a case in point. During the Taliban rule, the fear that Hazaras are aligning with Iran for a greater share in the country's economic and political resources had resulted in several instances of violent attacks leading to deaths and destructions. It had also caused a large-scale migration to Iran.<sup>3</sup>

The influence of Wahabi Islam on the mujahideen and the Taliban led to an existential threat for the Shias in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the 1990s. The political and economic insecurity along with frequent wars in the country compelled many Hazaras and other Shia minorities to migrate into neighbouring countries including Iran. This gave rise to both social and economic problems for Iran but also led to geo-strategic benefits for the latter as well.<sup>4</sup> According to the United Nations, there were around 20 lakh Afghan refugees in Iran during the rule of Taliban (1996-2001). A large number of them returned during the first few years of the US-backed regime in the country. However, with the Taliban coming

back to power now, there is a growing uncertainty about their future. Iran has tried to develop good relations with the Taliban as a possible way of defending the interests of the Shias in Afghanistan. It is too early to predict the implications of this approach.

Being a Shia country, it is considered natural for Iran to try to protect the interest of the members of the Shia community living in its bordering regions. According to Barzegar, "Iran primarily perceives the Taliban as a Salafist violent faction, against human and women's rights, and paying no respect to international norms and human heritage".<sup>5</sup> The presence of Shia communities across the border also provides Iran a sphere of influence beyond the defined diplomatic circles which can be used to influence political fate of Afghanistan. This has had its strategic benefits for Iran as well.

### **World Powers in Afghanistan**

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the US and Saudi support to the mujahideen unfolded a religious dynamic in Afghanistan, which has had a lasting effect on Afghanistan and strained Iran-Afghan relations. The souring of relations between Iran and the US, particularly after Iranian revolution

## IRAN AS A FACTOR IN INDIA'S POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

of 1979, added yet another dimension to Iran's relationship with Afghanistan. The rise of the Taliban and their hostile approach towards the Shias led Iran to develop a cautious approach in the 1990s. Even during the cold war, Iran did not support the US approach to Afghanistan despite the fact that it was equally hostile towards the then Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Iranians perceived the presence of the US forces in Afghanistan since its invasion in 2001 as an immediate threat to their security. Unlike in the 1980s when Iran's approach to the US-sponsored jihad in Afghanistan was largely neutral, in the immediate aftermath of US invasion in 2001, Iran was seen developing close linkage with the Taliban despite the ideological differences it had with the Sunni militant organization. Iran also claimed that prolonged presence of western forces would offer legitimacy to the extremists and imperil the security of the region. The rise of intensely sectarian Islamic State (ISIS) in the region even led to closer relationship between the Taliban and Iran, possibly because Al Qaeda, which had a major influence on Taliban, revised its position on the Shias in the aftermath of the US invasion. Iran was chary of the fact that spirited Taliban resistance to US and international forces provided an opportunity for

drug-traffickers and smugglers to indulge in illegal trading of goods across the border. The lawlessness in Afghanistan, Iran believed, gave opportunity to extremist groups within Iran to assert as well.

In the post-Taliban era, the US declared Iran as an enemy and one of the main targets in its so-called global "War on Terror" calling it an Axis of Evil.<sup>7</sup> The Americans claimed that Iran was developing nuclear bomb in the guise of acquiring/developing nuclear technology for peaceful purposes of economic development and hence it was violating the norms of Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Thus, America imposed economic sanctions on Iran for its nuclear programme, crippling its economy and foreign relations. In the midst of all this, partial withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2014 provided much-needed relief to Iranian policy makers. However, Afghanistan had signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with US by then, in 2012, providing it with certain privileges. Iran saw this agreement as a breach of traditional balance of power in the region as it provided the US the opportunity to intervene whenever it perceived a danger to world peace and for internal stability in Afghanistan. The Iran nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action



(JCPOA) in 2015 between Iran and five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) did raise Iranian hopes of a rapprochement with the West, however, under Trump presidency, the US withdrew from JCPOA in 2018 leading to heightened sense of insecurity in Iran, which was reflected in the anti-US orientation in its approach to Afghanistan as well.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan not only supported Taliban in Afghanistan but also provided it funding and training. The reasons for such support were religious, sectarian and political. According to Mohsen Milani, "the Saudis wanted to use Afghanistan as a springboard to spread (their) version of Islam throughout Central Asia and to neutralize Iran's revolutionary message".<sup>8</sup> This was also favourable to Pakistan because its Sunni majority population had sympathies for Taliban which was dominated by the Sunni Pashtuns. Some observers have argued that during the 1990s and beyond, Pakistan successfully used Taliban against two important powers in the region, i.e., India and Iran.<sup>9</sup> With the return of Taliban, Iranians might be feeling that Pakistan is more empowered now than ever before to carry forward its agenda in the region, which may not be in Iran's interest.

The Iran-Pakistan relationship has been rather uneven, with Iran looking at Pakistan's closeness to both the US and Taliban as a point of concern.<sup>10</sup> As a Sunni majority country with incidence of sectarian violence against Shias rising in Pakistan, Iran has its own sectarian concerns vis-à-vis Pakistan. After the Taliban takeover and US withdrawal, Iran's sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the Taliban and Pakistan might have returned, which is noticeable in the proclivity of Iran to participate in multilateral forums and support the stance of the international community including the US that the Taliban should ensure an inclusive government in Kabul.

Noticeably, Iran has developed stronger relations with China and Russia and is confident that together with them it could fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of NATO and US forces from the region. Iran also thinks it has a better chance of bargaining with Taliban in the changed circumstances and is trying to develop an independent relation with the Taliban ignoring Pakistani influence over them.

Iran's growing relationship with China in the recent years, particularly after the imposition of fresh US sanctions in 2018 and withdrawal of

the US from the Iran nuclear deal of 2015, may have larger repercussion on Iran's relations with Afghanistan, and India needs to factor this reality in its dealing with Iran.

### **Economic Development in Afghanistan**

Iran had tried to address the growing problems of Afghan refugees and drug-smuggling across its borders through use of force for some time. However, it realised very soon that force had a limited role in dealing with such problems, and it has adopted a much more nuanced approach in recent times. Now that Taliban are in power and Iranian government thinks it can make a deal with it, Iran finds itself in a much more comfortable situation than ever before. Iranian approach in the past had included ensuring identification and return of refugees to Afghanistan. Now it is focusing more on ensuring economic development of Afghanistan, particularly in the border regions inside Afghanistan so that illegal immigration becomes less economically attractive. Though this requires heavy economic investment in the border regions, Iranians are hopeful about the larger geopolitical and economic benefits that would accrue from such investment.

Iran is the fourth largest trade partner of Afghanistan with an

annual bilateral trade of around \$3 billion. In terms of non-oil exports, Afghanistan remains Iran's largest export destination. Given the benefits of prosperity and stability in Afghanistan for its own growth and political stability, Iran has a vision to create an "economic sphere of influence" in Afghanistan, so that it could control the transit of goods and services between the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia, China and India".<sup>11</sup> This has been reflected in the concentration of Iranian infrastructural investment in Herat since 2001 and is expected to grow now that the US has left and Iran has become a full member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

But it is also true that Iran cannot ensure peace and prosperity in Afghanistan alone. China, Russia, Pakistan and India need to play vital roles in Afghan reconstruction. The biggest challenge for Iran is to bring together all these countries for the peace and development of Afghanistan. Most of countries in the Iranian neighbourhood to the east, except Pakistan, had cordial relationships with Iran. Most of the Central Asian countries along with India and China are looking at Afghanistan as a partner for importing gas through pipelines from Iran. It is believed that massive Iranian investment in Afghanistan will ensure economic development

of the country along with job creation. Thus, Iran has been consistently playing active role in reconstruction programme of Afghanistan since the formation of the interim government in 2001 and is expected to increase that pace once the new Taliban regime gets stabilized. Iran had pledged to invest \$560 million during the 2002 Tokyo Conference, and \$100 million at the 2006 London Conference. It has pledged to invest even more since then. In order to develop better communication between its Chabahar port and Afghanistan border, Iran has also built a 120-kilometer-long road linking Herat in Afghanistan to Dogharoun in Iran.<sup>12</sup>

### **Iran's Strategic Options**

After US withdrawal from Afghanistan and imminent withdrawal from Iraq by the end of the year, Iran is strategically in a much better position to practice its autonomy in the region particularly after its growing closeness with China, Russia and other countries in Central Asia. As a full member of the SCO, and with the possibility of lifting of US sanctions in the near future after the return of the Democrats to power in Washington, Iran is likely to have unprecedented strategic advantage in the region. As was visible post-JCPAO in 2015, Iran

would become more capable economically to aid and finance the reconstruction in Afghanistan with a favourable Taliban in power this time round. The policy of differentiating between good and bad Taliban under the influence of Pakistan has softened the attitude of Iran towards Taliban and impacted Iran-India relations over the issue Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> India has been left behind and Iran, it seems, has successfully put itself in an advantageous position vis-à-vis Pakistan and Taliban. India needs to adopt a similar strategy and work with Iran to regain its lost ground in Afghanistan.

In Central Asia, Iran had no close ally for a very long time for the entire twentieth century and the first decade of the current century. However, in the recent past, it has become closer to both Russia and China. Keeping in mind the growing US attempts to corner China in recent times and Iranian hostilities towards what it calls persistent imperialist incursions by the US in the West and Central Asia, there is a potential for Iran developing much closer ties both with China and Russia. These three countries are already cooperating in SCO and with the withdrawal of American forces from the region relationship among them is expected to grow even deeper.

Keeping in mind India's historical hostilities with Pakistan, Iran remains the only option for India to enter Central Asia through Arabian Sea and Iranian territory. Ever since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, the influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan had come down due to Hamid Karzai's pro-India stand and his government's distrust of Pakistan. This continued even under Ashraf Ghani government. It is on the rise again after Taliban's return. However, despite the fact that Taliban are now closer to Pakistan, in the changed circumstances, it is very difficult for Taliban to avoid Iran the way they did during the 1990s.

Iran has looked towards India for tactical alliance against Pakistan vis-à-vis which it has had its own share of concerns. In 2003, president of Iran Mohammad Khatami was the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations in India. However, since then, Indian governments have undertaken steps in global diplomacy which could have squandered that opportunity of cooperation with Iran.<sup>14</sup>

### **India's Strategic Consideration in Afghanistan and Iran**

During the first term of Taliban rule in the 1990s a large number of Afghan people took shelter in India

and Iran. Some of the leaders from Afghanistan were educated in Iran and India. Since they were in power post-2001 US-led invasion of the country and pursued a much more inclusive government representing all ethnic groups in Afghanistan than Taliban, it was considered a bulwark against the sectarian terrorist groups. However, the strong presence of the US was, in a sense, a strategic loss for both Iran and India. The Afghan ruling elite, during the post-Taliban period (2001-2021), preferred the US to Iran and India as a guarantor for their rule. However, from the way the Taliban stages a comeback with minimal resistance from the people of Afghanistan, it can be concluded now that the majority of Afghans did not like the US presence; they came under the spell of the Taliban propaganda and looked at US presence as 'occupation'. The Americans did want to enable a smooth transition and leave as they saw it as the only way to ensure political stability in the country long trapped in wars. As some observers have argued, "ensuring smooth security transition is the key to larger political stability of Afghanistan" however, the Americans measured the success of their nation building project in Afghanistan on the basis of smoothness of political transition in the country.<sup>15</sup> For India, the US-controlled system was a favourable arrangement as militancy was

controlled and Pakistan's influence was checked. This sense of comfort led its policy makers to ignore the need to think beyond the immediate future. However, the US could not ensure a smooth transition to a representative system of democracy fully capable of maintaining its autonomy and security. The Taliban resistance, to a large extent supported and engineered by Pakistan, made it difficult for the US and its allies to stabilize the government in Kabul and ensure peace and economic growth in the war-torn country. Rather than investing their resources in development and reconstruction, the US and its allies were fighting an insurgency that sapped their energy and patience. Now that the Taliban are back in power and it is very difficult to revive the so-called anti-Taliban resistance movement, it has become necessary to establish a line of communication with the ruling establishment in Afghanistan, which is by default, the Taliban, and simultaneously make inroads through countries such as Iran.

### **Areas of Mutual Interest**

After the end of the first Taliban rule in Afghanistan and establishment of a democratically elected government with a hope of political stability, most Asian countries including India were trying hard to develop their relations with

the new Afghan government. Afghanistan's geo-strategic location makes it an important player in the Central and West Asia. Despite its traditional relations with Afghanistan, India's limitation of not having direct geographical access to the country creates a big hurdle in the development of relations. Afghanistan is a landlocked country and India can only access it either through Pakistan or Iran. Pakistan has denied India physical access to Afghanistan in the past for various reasons including its own strategic ambitions in the country. Pakistan does not want India to enter Central Asia through its territory.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Iran remains the only option for India to enter into Afghanistan and Central Asia.<sup>17</sup> For a very long time, both India and Iran were wary of Pakistan-US collaboration and regarded it inimical to their national security and economic interests. Hence, in the present phase, "India and Iran could extend cooperation in Afghanistan as both of them have common economic, strategic and commercial interest in this war-torn nation."<sup>18</sup>

In recent decades, the India-Iran relationship was envisioned as Strategic Partnership during President Khatami's visit to India in 2003. The signing of the Delhi Declaration, a vision document, was preceded by December 2001 Tehran Declaration when Vajpayee had

visited Iran. However, Indian attempts to develop relations in Afghanistan were countered by the remnants of Taliban and other factions mostly at the behest of Pakistan. Indian embassy in Kabul has been targeted by elements within the Taliban while Indian consulates in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif have also faced security threats from Taliban and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Iran has also faced a similar hostility in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule. In August 1998, the Taliban had killed 11 Iranian diplomats and one journalist in Mazar-e-Sharif which had led to a slump in Iran-Afghan relations. After the return of the Taliban, during December 2021, the Taliban have reportedly clashed with Iranian border guards in their efforts to capture several border posts.

Despite all the efforts put by the US and combined forces of NATO in the last twenty years, the Taliban have not only survived but are now able to hold power in the country. It is well-known that the Taliban regrouped and reasserted themselves with assistance from Pakistan, and the US found it difficult to deal with the resurgent Taliban and initiated a dialogue with them, ironically with the help of Pakistan. Now that the Taliban have come back to power, both Iran and India have

realized the need of similar engagements with them. Even if Iran had maintained links with the Taliban largely because of its worries about continued US presence in Afghanistan, the US decision to engage the Taliban since 2016 must have generated fears of loss of Iranian influence over Taliban. Be that as it may, Iran has proactively established its relationship with Taliban, while India seems to lack the will to do the same. There is a widespread understanding among the Indian policy makers that the Taliban are pro-Pakistan and talking to them may spoil the tough moral image Modi government in Delhi has been able to create vis-à-vis terrorism.

However, today, after the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan and ended the "never ending war" which cost it over US\$ 2 trillion and thousands of soldiers, India needs to think on similar lines as Iran and find a way of retaining its influence in Afghanistan. This is necessary especially because India's traditional linkage with non-Pashtun groups stands frayed today and the goodwill it has generated through its projects in Pashtun-dominated southern Afghanistan remains untapped, even in the face of the Taliban grudgingly acknowledging the same and urging India to stay put to the same track of development and

reconstruction. In fact, the Taliban spokespersons have said that India is an important country in the region and the new regime in Afghanistan would like to maintain good relations with it. While inter-ethnic disharmony in Afghanistan and under-representation of the minority ethnic groups remain a point of concern for the international community, engagement is a potent option to ensure that the Taliban change their mind through persuasion, particularly when the option of using force to moderate Taliban behaviour has found its limits vis-à-vis Taliban.

### **Issues in India-Iran Relations**

For the last couple of decades, India is getting closer to US while Iran-US relations continue to be mired in distrust and hostility. This dichotomy affects India-Iran relationship substantially. The US has often asked India to support its policy of isolating Iran at international platforms. Hillary Clinton, mentioned in her book *Hard Choices* that the main purpose of her short visit in May 2012 to India was to convince India to reduce its reliance on Iranian oil. India also reduced imports of Iranian oil and stopped the payment for the earlier imports.<sup>19</sup> This was the time when India was trying hard to finalize gas pipeline from Iran to India through Pakistan. China was

the fourth partner in this project. However, due to American pressure, India had to suspend the negotiations. The project continued without India. In 2009, India voted with the US against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA). However, after the change of government in Iran in July 2015 there was an agreement between Iran and the countries of P 5+1 on peaceful use of nuclear energy. This gave another chance to improve India-Iran relationship. However, during Trump presidency, the barbs in Iran-US the relationship returned complicating Indian approach towards Iran.

### **Economic Links**

One of the major areas of cooperation in Afghanistan between India and Iran was joint efforts in rebuilding the economy and social infrastructure destroyed due to decades of war in the country. Both Indians and Iranians have agreed that de-radicalization of the Afghan youth can be possible only through creation of jobs and better living conditions. India hosted Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan in 2012 to encourage private sector investment there.<sup>20</sup> Indian companies such as the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) won many contracts in Afghanistan in the post-2001 scenario. Indian

engagement in Afghanistan was a favourable development for Iran-India relations, before India became aligned with the US in its policy towards Afghanistan. For Iran, Indian investment in Afghanistan was a way to put a check on increasing control of the US over Central Asian economies, particularly Afghanistan. Iran was looking for building roads across Afghanistan to reach Central Asian market and it chose India as a partner. The Chabahar project provided the opportunity to collaborate in exploring the underdeveloped Afghanistan economy and further ways of cooperation. Apart from Chabahar, India and Iran were also looking forward also to develop a rail link between Chabahar and Hajigak mines in Bamiyan province.

These economic ties failed to realise their full potential partly due to Indian decision to join the American efforts and leave out Iran following reimposition of unilateral sanctions on Iran by the Trump administration. Even when the US opened channels of communication with Taliban, India could not entirely trust the possibility of US troops leaving in a hurry and could not also visualize the fall of the Kabul government in such a sudden and precarious manner.

### **The Chabahar Connection**

Iran has been trying to build a port in the Persian Gulf at Chabahar since 1973. This is extremely important for Iran's economic development and a critical foil in its larger policy towards Central Asia. India rightly saw it as an opportunity when Iran offered cooperation with it. It is so, because as discussed above, Iran is the only country through which India can enter any of the Central Asian countries including Afghanistan. Iran has been asking for partnership with India in developing Chabahar port since the 1990s itself. India only realized the potential of the project after the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). India signed a historic deal with Iran in 2002 "to invest \$85 million for the development of the Chabahar port into a full deep-sea port".<sup>21</sup> According to some analysts, India also "looks at Chabahar port as an entry route to Europe through the International North-South Transport Corridor". Even the US authorities see the coming up of the Chabahar project positively as it promises them an alternative entry point to access Afghanistan or any other Central Asian countries and thus reduces their dependence on Pakistan, which explains why the US overlooked Indian efforts in Chabahar, even



## IRAN AS A FACTOR IN INDIA'S POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

when it imposed heavy sanctions against Iran.

In April 2015, China signed an agreement with Pakistan to construct a pipeline between Gwadar port to Nawabshah in Pakistan. China also helped and built a port at Gwadar located on the Makran coast of Pakistan. It is located close to the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf which is a crucial export route for Iranian and Saudi oil and gas to China through Pakistan. Before the construction of Gwadar, Chabahar port was the only port which functioned as a gateway to Central Asia. This was projected as a response by China and Pakistan to the Chabahar project.<sup>22</sup>

In 2012, India and Iran invited Afghanistan as a third partner in their Chabahar project. The project also includes rail and road networks to connect with the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC). It may function as a trans-shipment hub for onward shipment Afghanistan via Zahedan through a 600-kilometre road and also as a transit point for the landlocked Central Asian Republics. Thus, this project is trying to bring together all Central Asian countries along with other important players such as India, Russia and East European countries. However, there is a view that "it is delusional to think we can develop

the port complex and the land access to Afghanistan onwards to Central Asia all on our own and maintain them".<sup>23</sup> It is also being argued that for multilateral cooperation to build and operate Chabahar, Iran is not very enthusiastic about the exclusive role for India in the project. This is part of India's "Connect Central Asia Policy." It intends to reduce Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan for the supplies from India. For example, Pakistan refused to allow India to supply important parts and machinery for the construction of Salma dams in Afghanistan in the past. Pakistan has also shown its reservations about granting passage even for essential commodities such as wheat despite the fact that there is a Trade and Transit Agreement signed between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

China made decent investments in Afghanistan and other Central Asian Countries between 2001 and 2020. It became closer to Iran, which earlier used to look at Chinese activities in the region with suspicion and viewed Central Asia as its area of strategic depth. The Iranian sense of unease at Chinese strategic prowess in Central Asia could have brought Iran and India closer given India's attempts to counter growing Chinese influence in its immediate and extended neighbourhood. However, India missed the opportunity and

chose to align their policies with that of the US, leaving Iran with the option to reconcile its position with China. Iran has, in fact, signed a strategic deal with China for 25 years and China has played instrumental role for Iran's full membership in the SCO leaving India with no real partners in the region.<sup>24</sup>

### **Challenges**

India-Iran collaboration in Afghanistan has many prospects in terms of economic and political interests of all the three countries. However, there are various challenges too. One of the foremost challenges facing India and Iran in Afghanistan is Pakistan. India's hostile relationship with Pakistan, at a time when Iran is looking for a more balanced and cooperative relationship with it, may create misunderstandings affecting India-Iran relations. With reduced support from the US, Pakistan has realised that any antagonism with Iran would be counterproductive for its strategic position in the Central Asia.<sup>25</sup> Like Pakistan, Iran too has moved closer to China and now they see greater benefits in developing a triangular relationship in Afghanistan. Iran has already invited Pakistan to join the Chabahar project as a third important partner.<sup>26</sup> Commenting at the development at the time an Indian observer had argued that "Yet the

most important goal for New Delhi remains the prevention of Pakistan from regaining its central role in Afghan affairs. The last time Pakistan enjoyed such a position was the 1990s, and Indian security interests suffered to an unprecedented degree".<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, given the fact that the Taliban are back in power, India has very limited options to follow in Afghanistan and it may require it to recalibrate its stance vis-à-vis Afghanistan issue in the face of Pakistani sensitivity to continuing Indian influence in Afghanistan.

Another major challenge for India in Afghanistan is China. In the last decade, China has become a strong player in the region and established alliances with both Iran and Pakistan. Iranians have more than one reason now to rely on China. It is not only the largest trade partner but also a reliable ally in world politics. It has stood with Iran during the most crucial phases of its history. When American sanctions were imposed on Iran no other than China, not even India, was ready to support it. China accounts for approximately 50 percent of Iran's total crude oil exports. China has invested heavily in Afghanistan, and it has great influence in Central Asia. Iran may thus prefer China to India if there is a point of confrontation. Since China shares disputed borders with India, realists would predict that the

potential for conflict between India and China over influence in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean region, and Central Asia remains alive as long as China continues to meddle in India's northeast and Kashmir.<sup>28</sup> India may have to make tough choices if it wants to have any real presence in Afghanistan now.

In the recent past, China has invested heavily in Pakistan in Gwadar and also building a road link between Gwadar and China through Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK). This is provocation enough for India. China has also supported the building of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. Iran too is keen to extend the pipeline to China to feed the big Chinese market mainly because Iran believes that India has not shown much interest in it due to US pressures. China has an ambitious plan to revive the old silk route through its Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) projects and both Iran and Pakistan are supposed to play an important role in it.<sup>29</sup> As noted by another observer, "China is playing a long game in West Asia. During the period of sanctions on Iran, China expanded ties with Iran. India did the opposite and failed to retain the balance between Western pressure and ties with Iran".<sup>30</sup> It was hoped that notwithstanding Iran's growing

bonhomie with Pakistan and China, India may stay in close contact with Iran and consciously and consistently pursue good diplomatic and economic relations with it.<sup>31</sup> However, developments in last couple of years, especially after the reimposition of US sanctions on Iran suggest that India has failed to take any assuring steps with Iran.

Two smaller but important challenges faced by India and Iran in Afghanistan were the persistence of warlords, mostly hostile to Iran and India in the Afghanistan politics. The war-lords (also called regional strong-men) have a local following and most of them are supported by Pakistan and Taliban in the remote areas. Iranians are better equipped to deal with these warlords than India for historical and cultural reasons, but it would be difficult for even Iran to completely wipe them out. Afghan refugees and migrant workers in Iran contribute greatly in the Afghan economy through remittances. However, due to its own economic problems and ideological threat Iran often acts harshly on these refugees denying them basic rights available to them as refugees. Some of them are deported to Afghanistan on the allegations of drug trafficking, terrorism or any such issue. This increases the hostility with Afghanistan against Iran. Though the influence of those warlords may

go down under Taliban's centralized rule, they may still continue to influence Afghanistan's foreign policy.

Due to decades of lawlessness, poppy production grew in large parts of Afghanistan making Afghanistan world's largest producer of opium and a leading centre for illicit trade in drugs. The money coming from this illegal trade has been a vital source of the finance for groups fighting against the US or private militias maintained by the war lords in remote areas. Different estimates claim that more than 15,000 Iranians and more than hundred security forces have been killed or injured in previous decades in fights against drug traffickers.<sup>32</sup> Since the Taliban have expressed their desire to curb the illegal production and trade of poppy and other drugs in the country, both Iran and India would like to cooperate in curbing this illicit trade as the money coming from it has been used to finance terror activities in both the countries.

The persisting uncertainty in Afghanistan is one of the main reasons why cooperation between Iran and India was not working as expected in the last few years. The other major reason for the setbacks in Iran-India collaboration in Afghanistan is related to change in approach of the Indian government

towards Iran under US pressure especially during the presidency of Donald Trump. It is yet to be seen whether that break in relationship caused by India's unwillingness to stand with Iran during its most crucial moments in last few years can be mended after the US and Iran have agreed to talk to revive the nuclear deal and end the sanctions. As far as India's Afghan policy is concerned, India needs to come out of the American shadow, while it may still hold regular dialogue with the US to make the latter understand the nuances of its approach keeping its own interest in sight.

The growing relation between India, Israel and the US remains yet another worry for Iran. Iranians have been arch enemies of Israel since the Islamic Revolution and they see it as an imperialist state supported by the US. Israelis too have maintained their hostilities against Iran. Any country which has close relations with Israel is seen with suspicion by the Iranians. However, at a time when the states in the Gulf region are mending their relations with Israel, India's relations with Israel should not come as a stumbling block in India-Iran relations.

### **Conclusion**

According to realist theory of international relations, an

understanding of strength and weaknesses of the adversary is essential to fulfil one's strategic objectives. Apart from revolutionary rhetoric, foreign policy of Iran, like most countries of the world, has been in accordance with realist framework, always calculating costs and benefits while executing its foreign policy with different states. Iran is aspiring for a greater and legitimized regional role in which it can improve its standing and seize business and commercial opportunities whenever and wherever it finds them.

Iran's aspirations of greater regional role can prove complementary to India's ambitions to forge trade and commercial linkages with the countries in West and Central Asia. India's present-day relations with Iran may look like a shadow of its promises in the past. However, in the past, the collaboration with Iran has largely been based on the energy needs of India, access to Afghan territory to build bridges with Central Asia, and its enduring enmity with Pakistan. Given Pakistan's unreasonable hostility with India and its denial of overland transit to Indian goods through its territory, Indian hope or desire for reviving its presence as well as influence in Central Asia cannot fructify without the help of

Iran. India's relations with Iran may have suffered due to the policies adopted by India in the last few years, however, if India makes the right moves it would be very difficult for Iran to overlook the benefits of engaging India which is a big market and a thriving economy today.

India also has to take a relook at its approach towards the Taliban and China now that the former are back in power in Afghanistan and both Iran and China think that cooperation with it is the only way to create lasting peace and stability in the region. Indian policy makers may have to think out of the box to regain some of its lost grounds in Afghanistan with the help of Iran now as that country remains to be the sole option in the region for it.

Given the potential of the relationship seen from a realist perspective, India and Iran have long-term benefits in cooperating over Afghanistan. They also have complementarities in their approaches and understanding of regional issues. The future depends on the "long term" strategies to be adopted by both India and Iran on Afghanistan and the overtures India would make to re-inject warmth and urgency into its relations with Iran.



### References

1. Smruti S. Patnaik, "India's Afghan Policy: Beyond Bilateralism", *Strategic Analysis*, 2014, 36 (4), pp. 569-583
2. Mohsen M Milani, "Iran and Afghanistan", 5 October 2010, *The Iran Primer*, USIP, URL: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-afghanistan>, (Accessed on 27 June 2014)
3. Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010 .
4. Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting extremism", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol-78, No 6, November-December 1999, pp. 22-35.
5. Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy in post-Taliban Afghanistan", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol 37, Issue 2, 2014, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926213?scroll=top&needAccess=true>( Accessed on 10 January 2020)
6. G.S. Bakshi, "Afghanistan as rentier state model: Lessons from the collapse", New Delhi, *Strategic Analysis*, 1998, (22) 5
7. Mohsen M Milani, "Iran's policy towards Afghanistan", *The Middle East Journal*, 2006, pp. 235-256.
8. Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, "Why Iran Would not Leave Afghanistan?" *Lawfare*, 2014, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/08/the-foreign-policy-essay-why-iran-wont-leave-afghanistan/>
9. See, note no 5
10. Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, "Why Iran Would not Leave Afghanistan?" *Lawfare*, 31 August 2014, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/08/the-foreign-policy-essay-why-iran-wont-leave-afghanistan/>
11. Mohsen M. Milani, note 7, pp. 235-256.

## IRAN AS A FACTOR IN INDIA'S POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

12. Rajeev Agarwal, "Could Iran and India be Afghanistan's Plan B", *The Diplomat*, February 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/could-iran-and-india-be-afghanistans-plan-b/> (Accessed on January 2020. )
13. Harsh Pant, "India in Afghanistan: A Rising Power or A Hesitant Power", Centre for International Peace and Security Studies Working Paper, 2011
14. Tanvi Madan, "India's Relationship with Iran: It's Complicated", Brookings, 28 February 2014, URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2014/02/28/indias-relationship-with-iran-its-complicated/> (Accessed on January 10, 2020)
15. Vinay Kaura, "India and Iran: Challenges and Opportunities", *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2015, at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/india-iran-relations-challenges-and-opportunity/> (Accessed on 15 January 2021)
16. M Shanthie D'Souza, "India's Aid to Afghanistan: Challenges and Prospects", *Strategic Analysis*, 2007, Vol. 30 (5), pp. 833-842
17. See note no 12.
18. Tabassum Firdous, "Indo – Iran Relations : Reassessing India's Iran Policy", *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 2016 <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P4-2085005195/indo-iran-relations-reassessing-india-s-iran-policy> (Accessed on 10 January 2020)
19. *The Economic Times*, 31 March, 2015
20. Gulshan Sachdeva, "The Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan", IDSA Website, 26 June 2012, URL: [https://idsa.in/idsacomments/TheDelhiInvestmentSummitonAfghanistan\\_gsachdeva\\_260612](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/TheDelhiInvestmentSummitonAfghanistan_gsachdeva_260612) (Accessed on 10 January 2020).
21. Praveen Swamy, "India Backs 'New Silk Route' in Central Asia", *The Hindu*, 24 September, 2011, [www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-backs-new-silk-road-in-central-asia/article2480058.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-backs-new-silk-road-in-central-asia/article2480058.ece) , (Accessed on 19 June 2014).
22. Gulshan Sachdeva, "India's Changing Approach towards Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Afghanistan Debacle", *The Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, 17 December 2021, at <https://www.cacianalyst.org/>

## IRAN AS A FACTOR IN INDIA'S POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

[publications/feature-articles/item/13691-india](#) (Accessed on 19 December 2021)

23. See note no 15.

24. Happymon Jacob, "Why go it alone", 3 June 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Why-go-it-alone/article14380513.ece> (Accessed on 10 January 2021)

25. Alex Vatanka, "Making Sense of Iran-China Strategic Agreement, Middle East Institute", April 26, 2021, URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/making-sense-iran-china-strategic-agreement> (Accessed on 10 September 2021)

26. See note no 15.

27. See note no 24.

28. Harsh Pant, *India's Afghan Muddle*, New Delhi, Harper Collins, 2014

29. See note no 15.

30. Thomas Zimmerman, "The New Silk Roads : China, The US and the future of Central Asia", 2015 [https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/zimmerman\\_new\\_silk\\_road\\_final\\_2.pdf](https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/zimmerman_new_silk_road_final_2.pdf) (Accessed on 10 January 2021)

31. Stanly Johny, "China's long Game in West Asia", *The Hindu*, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/China%E2%80%99s-long-game-in-West-Asia/article14025222.ece> (Accessed on 10 January 2021)

32. See note no 15.