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Contemporary Relations between India and Iran

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Introduction:

India-Iran relations span millennia marked by meaningful interactions. The two countries shared a border till 1947 and share several common features in their language, culture and traditions. Indian subcontinent and the Persian Gulf have strong commercial, energy, cultural and people-to-people links. India and Iran established diplomatic links on March 15, 1950. In addition to the Embassy in Tehran, India has two Consulates in Iran, one in Bandar Abbas and other in Zahedan. Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Shah of Iran visited Jawaharal India twice (March 1956 and February 1978) and Prime Minister Nehru visited Iran in 1963. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Prime Minister Morarji Desai visited Iran in April 1974 and June 1977 respectively. After the Iranian Revolution, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Iran in 1993 and President Rafsanjani paid a visit to India in 1995. Indian Vice President Shri K. R. Narayanan visited Iran in October 1996.

In January 2003, the then Iranian President, Syed Muhammad Khatami reciprocated the visit as the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day's parade in 2003, showing the remarkable degree of warmth in Indo - Iranian relations. It was a clear signal of the high importance Indian attached to its relations with Iran and its assessment that Iran was a vital player in regional inter - state relations and security arrangement. During the visit, the two countries also signed the "New Delhi Declaration" and the "Road Map to Strategic Cooperation", which promulgated a plan for the evolving partnership between them. The two sides signed seven agreements pertaining to - economic exchanges, science and technology, information technology, educational training, reconstruction of Afghanistan and anti-terrorism. Besides this, they also agreed to explore opportunities for cooperation in defence, including training and exchange of visits.

India's stance was regarded by Iran as a turn - around in its approach towards Iran. Iran's

reaction was swift and it threatened immediately to cancel the LNG deal struck between the two countries in June 2005. Following the second vote in UN against Iran in February 2006, following which Iran made its displeasure even more apparent. In fact, Iran even went to the extent of refusing permission to India fighter jets to fly over its territory to take part in 'Red Flat' air - combat exercise in the US in September, 2008.

After the March 2006 Civil - Nuclear Cooperation Agreement between India and US, India voting against Iran in UN, differences in Iran - Pakistan - India gas pipeline and on other issues, relations between the two countries became affected. However, after almost two years of sour, relations between the two improved when in July 2008, Pranab Mukherjee, Minister of External Affairs led the Indian delegation to the XV - Ministerial conference of the Non - Aligned Movement (NAM) which was held in Tehran, on 29-30 July, 2008. He held number of meetings with his counterparts on the sideline of the conference. As one of the founders of the Non - Aligned movement, India remained strongly committed to its purposes and principles and would continue its active and constructive engagement within it. India would also work to further strengthen solidarity and cooperation among the member states of NAM, which continued to play a crucial role in international affairs.

The beginning of the first decade of the 21st century saw the rapid rise of Taliban not only in Afghanistan, but also in other parts of South Asia. Pakistan and Afghanistan were the principal frontiers in combating the cross - cutting linkages of terrorist groups that targeted India and Iran. The Indo - Iranian Joint Working Group on Terrorism was a ready instrument for beginning a renewed cooperation on combating terrorism in the region. The future of Afghanistan and the role of Taliban in the emerging scenario post - NATO - led ISAF withdrawal had greatly affected both India and Iran. India was also deeply apprehensive of Taliban's Jihadist' ideology and its potential for fomenting trouble in Kashmir. India had every reason to oppose the extremist Taliban as it had been on the receiving end of Islamist terrorism for many years - in Kashmir and beyond and it never wanted any group that subscribed to this ideology to reach a position of power in South Asia.

The minister for Economic and Financial Affairs of Iran, Dr. Shamseddin Hosseini visited India in February 2011 and during official meeting called likewise, for improving the bilateral trade between the two countries. India's National Security Advisor, Mr. Shivshankar Menon visited Iran for the 8th round of the security consultations in March 2011.

In the year 2014, India and Iran continued their relationship with high level interactions. During this period, number of officials visited both the countries and several MoU's and Agreements were signed between the two countries. Besides, from August 8-14, 2014, a successful trial run was conducted by India along International North South Transit Corridor (INSTC). This trial run included Bandar Abbas- Astara and Bandar Abbas- Amirabad routes.

In his August 2015 visit to India after the Vienna nuclear agreement, the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif raised the IS threat in the discussions with his Indian counterpart and solicited India's cooperation to fight it. He added that the IS group represented "a common threat" though "some countries in our region" were using it to secure limited tactical gains. That Zarif bringing up the question of the IS threat was an indicative of a resurgent Iran, ready to forge security ties with India - something it had not been able to do so during the years of estrangement with the West on the nuclear issue.

The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi had given its approval to the proposal of the Minister of Shipping for provision and operationalisation of credit of 150 million USD from EXIM Bank for development of Chabahar Port in Iran. Chabahar port was situated outside the Persian Gulf in Iran and would help in expanding maritime commerce in the region. India had negotiated on this project to facilitate the growing trade and investment with Iran and other countries of the region, notably Afghanistan and also provided opportunities to Indian companies to penetrate and enhance their footprint in the region. An MoU was signed between India and Iran on 06th May, 2015 and as per the MoU, India would equip and operate two berths in Chabahar Port Phase-I with a capital investment of USD 85.21 million and annual revenue expenditure of USD 22.95 million on a ten year lease. Ownership of equipment would be transferred to Iranian side on completion of 10 year period or for an extended period, based on mutual agreement. The Iranian side had requested for provision of a credit of USD 150 million in accordance with the MoU. As per the MoU, operation of two berths would commence within a period of maximum 18 months after the signing of the contract.

The final text of the India - Iran - Afghanistan Trilateral Agreement on Transport and Transit Corridors (Chabahar Agreement) was completed during the second meeting of experts from India, Afghanistan and Iran held in New Delhi on April 11, 2016. This "draft Agreement envisages trilateral cooperation for providing alternative access to seas to Afghanistan inter alia for Afghanistan's trade with India. When the Agreement came into force, it would significantly enhance utilisation of Chabahar Port, contribute to economic growth of Afghanistan and facilitate better regional connectivity, including between India and connections to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Agreement would be a strategic bulwark for greater flow of people and goods among the three countries, as well as, in the region.

The visit of Iranian President Rouhani on February 15, 2018 to India was testimony to the fact that India's "Think West" policy, like its "Act East" policy, was thriving and blooming. Rouhani's visit had given decisive shot in the arm to India's growing engagement with West Asia. Rouhani's visit provided a welcome opportunity to the two sides to give a vigorous push to bilateral ties in the areas of connectivity, energy, infrastructure, trade, investment, security, defense, culture

and people-to-people contacts. The nine Agreements signed during the visit covered a wide gamut of issues including all the above subjects had provided a strong impetus to bilateral engagement.

As a consequent of US sanctions on Iran, India had stopped importing oil from Iran after American waivers granted to eight buyers expired in May 2019. India, which was the second biggest purchaser of Iranian oil after China, had agreed to restrict its monthly purchase to 1.25 million ton or 15 million ton in a year (300, 000 barrels per day), down from 22.6 million ton (452,000 barrels per day) bought in 2017-18 financial year.

On July 7, 2020, Iran began the track-laying operations for the Chabahar-Zahedan railroad, which is planned to be completed by March 2022. Its short-term economic goal is estimated to be the transportation of 927,000 passengers and 2.8 million tonnes of cargo by March 2022. It was further noted by the Iranian official that as far as the Chabahar Port is concerned, Iran has always been committed to its common vision and partnership with India to develop it.

Amidst all these developments, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mousaviemphasised Tehran's multi-vector policy in a tweet on July 25, 2020 stating: "Iran has a longstanding policy of maintaining balanced, friendly relations with all Eurasian and East/South Asian powers. Our potential long-term cooperation agreements with China and Russia, and our continued joint work with India in Chabahar prove this. We are determined to uphold this policy." Such statements are a clear indication of Iran's desire to build ties with key Asian powers to mitigate the impact of sanctions.

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

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