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Strategic Imperatives and Geopolitical Challenges: India's Policy toward Iran in an Evolving Regional Order

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Abstract:

This study examines the intricacies of India's foreign policy concerning Iran and the difficulties it presents. This study provides a framework for interpreting New Delhi's commitments toward Iran in the context of evolving regional and global security dynamics by presenting two essential concepts: Iran's geopolitical linchpin status and India's expanded neighborhood. The article discusses five major strategic interests—engagement with West Asia, the security and stability of the Persian Gulf, overland access to Central Asia and Russia, energy security, and the geopolitics of Afghanistan—in order to emphasize India's complex concerns in its ties with Iran. Yet, a variety of intricate elements, including as Iran's regional activities, the Gulf states, Israel's and the US's responses to Iranian moves, and the growing strategic relations between China and Iran, complicate Indo-Iranian cooperation. Iran thus turns into a crucial strategic enigma that influences New Delhi's foreign policy. This article provides a more nuanced understanding of the Iran problem and how it affects India's foreign policy decisions in the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: Afghanistan and Central Asia, Energy Security, Extended Neighborhood, Geostrategic Pivot, India and Iran, Regional Stability.

Introduction:

The goal of this article is to examine the impact of the Iran on India's foreign policy formation, considering the evolving regional and international security landscape. Iran is a significant factor in India's wider neighborhood and has an impact on the country's foreign and strategic policy objectives in the Persian Gulf and larger Eurasian region. As they manage their complex relationship, the nuanced dynamics between India and Iran pose a complex quandary (fear) and strategic conundrum.

By facilitating overland access to Central Asia and guaranteeing energy security, Iran plays a

crucial role in India's geostrategic calculations in the South-West-Central Asian region, which includes Afghanistan. On the other hand, Iran's actions in the region, especially its rivalry with the US and Washington's friends in West Asia that is- Arabs and Israel, complicate India's situation. Furthermore, India's foreign policy concerns must take into account the Iranian challenge due to the changing geopolitics of Afghanistan. This article clarifies the nuances of the Iran problem and how it affects the foreign policy decision-making process in New Delhi.

Over the course of the critical last phase in Afghanistan, which saw the rise of the Taliban and the collapse of the US-backed Afghan government, India's External Affairs Minister (EAM), S Jaishankar, made two important trips to Iran in less than a month.¹ Notably, Jaishankar signaled India's proactive stance by meeting Iranian president-elect Ebrahim Raisi on July 6, 2021, being the first foreign leader to do so. He later made a second trip back to Tehran in early August to take part in Raisi's inauguration ceremony². Following this, Afghanistan was a major topic of conversation when Iranian Foreign Minister Dr. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited India in June 2022. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India released a press release emphasizing that both nations stressed the urgent delivery of humanitarian supplies to the Afghan people while holding discussions on international and regional issues, including the Afghanistan situation³.

After a period of comparatively stagnant Indo-Iranian relations since 2018, there has been a noticeable upsurge in diplomatic engagement between Tehran and New Delhi. This indicates major strategic realignments brought about by the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent rise of the Taliban. India's assertive efforts to engage with Iran demonstrate the latter's critical role in determining Afghanistan's geopolitical environment following the US withdrawal. Additionally, new opportunities for cooperation between India and Iran exist as a result of Iran's recent admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), particularly in the areas of connectivity and security. This breakthrough has the potential to strengthen and broaden the two countries' collaboration in these important areas.

The geopolitical dynamics of the Eurasian region have been significantly impacted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Due to the sharp decline in relations between Russia and the West, pivot states such as Iran and Turkey have become increasingly important from a geopolitical standpoint for both parties. Russia is aggressively looking for alternate trade routes, monetary arrangements, political backing, and connectivity possibilities as the strict Western

¹ "Jaishankar meets Iranian President-elect," The Hindu, 8 July 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

² Suhasini Haidar, "Jaishankar's Tehran visit significant for timing on Afghanistan," The Hindu, 5 August 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

³ "Visit of H. E. Dr. Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran to India" (press release, Ministry of External Affairs, 8 June 2022), <https://mea.gov.in/>.

sanctions come into place. With its overland routes and ports such as Chabahar and Bandar Abbas, Iran becomes an important link for Russia to connect with India and Asian markets in this scenario. Furthermore, Iran is a major player in the world's gas and oil markets. Russia and Iran both play crucial roles in the Syrian situation, which explains Russian President Vladimir Putin's travel to Syria in July 2022. The article acknowledges the fluidity of the situation and refrains from drawing firm judgments on the war's impact or potential course given the ongoing fighting in Ukraine.

India's Extended Neighborhood and Iran:

India's concept of an "Extended Neighborhood" represents a strategic vision that goes beyond its immediate borders, encompassing regions that are vital for its economic, security, and geopolitical interests. This broader perspective includes West Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region, with a particular focus on Iran, given its pivotal role in connecting South Asia to Central Asia and the Middle East.

India's policy makers perceive "security - as lying in a neighborhood of widening concentric circles."⁴ India's foreign policy aims to create a geostrategic environment composed of three ever-expanding and concentric circles of engagement. South Asia, extending from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, makes up the first circle. India occupies a prominent position in South Asia due to its advantages in geography and population, actively vying for supremacy and using its might to stifle outside intervention.⁵

The neighborhood that extends beyond South Asia, encompassing West, Central, Southeast, and Indian Ocean areas, is included in the second circle. To "balance the influence of other powers and prevent them from undercutting its interests" is India's goal in this area. In view of analysts like David Scott, India's "vision of an extended neighborhood involves power projection by India; be it hard power military and economic projection or be it soft power cultural and ideational strands,"⁶ With a comprehensive framework that steers India's participation in all directions and a 360-degree view of the potential beyond South Asia, the extended neighborhood notion has grown into a comprehensive idea.

Finally, the third circle, which represents the entire globe, represents India's ambitions to become a major world power. It is an indication of India's realization that its strategic obligations and interests go well beyond its immediate vicinity. India wants to actively participate in international decision-making processes, contribute to eleven global concerns, and shape world politics in this

⁴ "Speech by Foreign Secretary Shri Shivshankar Menon on 'India and International Security' at the International Institute of Strategic Studies" (transcript, Ministry of External Affairs, 3 May 2007), [https:// www.mea.gov.in/](https://www.mea.gov.in/).

⁵ C Raja Mohan, "India and the Balance of Power," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2006), 17–32.

⁶ David Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighborhood' Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review* 8, no. 2 (2009), 107.

circle. In addition to being a major regional force, India aspires to play a significant role in international affairs by advancing peace and stability, defending its own interests, and forming alliances with other nations.

India's goal to be a responsible and significant player in tackling the complex opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century is highlighted by this larger global viewpoint. The strategic planners of India maintain that "the logic of geography is unrelenting" and that "with our footprint reaching well beyond South Asia and our interests straddling across different sub-categories of Asia—be it West Asia, East Asia, South-east Asia or Central Asia—geography gives India a unique position in the geo-politics of the Asian continent."⁷ According to India, "our exclusive economic zone spans the waters from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca" and "Central Asia verges on our northern frontiers."⁸

India has stepped up its political, economic, and defense ties with the wider neighborhood since the conclusion of the Cold War. The "beginning of the reassertion of India's historically benign and stabilizing role in these regions premised on the commerce of ideas and goods" is the deeper engagement with the broader neighborhood.⁹ In light of India's expanded neighborhood idea, West Asia is significant. In 2005, India introduced the Look West policy, citing the Gulf area as "part of our natural economic hinterland, like South-East and South Asia." In our larger Asian community, we must work to establish closer economic ties with each of our neighbors.¹⁰

Iran stands out as the country that is closest to India geographically in the Gulf, with resources, political clout, and a location that makes it ideal for defending India's interests in West Asia. Iran plays a very important role in India's strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan, as evidenced by the MEA's structure, which places Iran in the same category as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Furthermore, Iran's role as a link between the Indian Ocean and Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus region adds another crucial element to India's strategic engagement. Iran's role in India's extended neighborhood is multifaceted, encompassing critical dimensions of connectivity, energy security, regional stability, and geopolitical balancing. As India seeks to assert its influence in West Asia and Central Asia, Iran remains an indispensable partner despite the

⁷ "Speech by Foreign Secretary Shri Shivshankar Menon."

⁸ "Speech by Foreign Secretary Shri Shivshankar Menon."

⁹ "Indian Foreign Policy: A Road Map for the Decade Ahead' - Speech by External Affairs Minister Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the 46th National Defence College Course" (transcript, Ministry of External Affairs, 15 November 2006, <https://mea.gov.in/>).

¹⁰ "PM launches 'Look West' Policy to boost cooperation with Gulf" (press release, Prime Minister's Office, 27 July 2005, <https://archivepmo.nic.in/>).

challenges posed by regional rivalries, sanctions, and shifting alliances. Navigating the complexities of this relationship will be key to advancing India's strategic interests in its extended neighborhood. Significant events have highlighted the complex and interconnected geopolitics at play in West Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia, such as the 2016 kidnapping of an Indian intelligence official at the port of Chabahar. The sections that follow this looks into complexities of challenged relationship between two countries.¹¹

Geopolitics of Afghanistan:

Afghanistan's geopolitical significance has long been underscored by its strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Historically referred to as the "graveyard of empires," Afghanistan has attracted the interest of global powers due to its position as a gateway to various regions. Its proximity to major powers like China, Russia, and Iran, as well as its role as a buffer state between British India and the Russian Empire during the Great Game, has made it a focal point of geopolitical competition.

Iran stands out as India's nearest geographical neighbor in the Gulf, with priceless resources, political clout, and a location that makes it advantageous. Iran has a natural place in Afghan politics due to the country's close geographic vicinity and the existence of Shia minorities, mostly among the Hazara ethnic group. Iran is one of Afghanistan's most important neighbors, with the exception of Pakistan. The Iranian government views itself as the protector of Shia interests in the entire area, and Tehran is compelled to become involved in Afghan issues due to the sizeable Shia population, which makes up approximately 10–12 percent of the Afghan population. Iran has historically had influence over the western Afghan city of Herat.¹² Furthermore, Iran has the capacity to somewhat counterbalance Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan as a strong regional force in and of itself.

Iran, together with Russia and India, backed the Northern Alliance's anti-Taliban forces in the late 1990s. India and Iran experienced relief after the Taliban were driven from power in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. But in the years that followed, Tehran had to modify its tactics due to the worsening ties between Iran and the United States and the Taliban's reappearance as a potent force. To protect its interests, Iran started corresponding with the Taliban and developed a cooperative relationship with them. Iran even sponsored discussions between the leaders of the Taliban and Afghanistan in July 2021.¹³ Consequently, the Iranian embassy stayed open and its staff

¹¹ Indo-Asian News Service, "Kulbhushan Jadhav was abducted from Iran by Pak, claims Baloch activist," Business Standard, 18 January 2018, <https://www.business-standard.com/>.

¹² Deepika Saraswat, "The Iranian Approach to the Taliban: Understanding Changes and Continuities," Indian Council of World Affairs, 25 August 2021, <https://icwa.in/>.

¹³ Vinay Kaura, "Iran's influence in Afghanistan," Middle East Institute, 23 July 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/>.

did not flee when Kabul fell on August 15, 2021, demonstrating Tehran's nuanced response to the evolving situation in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Iran is seen as one of the main winners of the US pullout from Afghanistan, along with China, Pakistan, and Russia. It is crucial to remember that the Taliban and Iran are not natural partners; rather, they merely decided that it would be advantageous for both parties if US soldiers left. Clashes between Iran's border security personnel and the Taliban in June and July 2022 demonstrate the underlying problems in their relationship.¹⁵

Iran's involvement in Afghanistan poses a problem for India. Iran is seen by India as a useful ally in Afghan politics. Regarding the US intervention in Afghanistan, there has been a difference of opinion between Indians and Iranians. While New Delhi plainly profited from the US presence in Afghanistan, which enabled the extension of India's involvement in the country both militarily and politically, Tehran perceived the US as a contributing factor to the issue. India's prospects in Afghanistan have suffered as a result of the US withdrawal. India is still wary of an Afghanistan dominated by the Taliban even though it has been interacting with them and has reopened its embassy in Kabul. India's diplomatic efforts with Iran are a part of a larger strategic reorientation.

With the situation in Afghanistan changing so quickly, New Delhi wants to keep its established connection with Tehran. Iran has developed the Fatemiyoun, a Shia Afghan militia force, throughout the years, giving Tehran considerable influence in Afghanistan. Tehran does not currently seem to be publicly endorsing the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan. But things might quickly change if Sunni extremist Taliban members become more prominent and adopt policies that target non-Sunni Muslims. Like with India, Iran's long-term objectives coincide with restricting Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban; the Indo-Iranian collaboration will be important in this endeavor.

Thus, the geopolitics of Afghanistan is defined by its strategic location, the interplay of regional and global powers, and the enduring challenges of security, stability, and economic development.¹⁶ As a pivotal state in a volatile region, Afghanistan's geopolitical landscape will continue to shape the strategies of both regional actors and global powers for the foreseeable future.

Role of Iran as a Geostrategic Pivot:

Iran's role as a geostrategic pivot is defined by its central geographical location, significant energy resources, and political influence in the Middle East and beyond. Its ability to shape regional

¹⁴ C Raja Mohan, "Ebrahim Raisi and India's Bet on Iran," *Foreign Policy*, 4 August 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

¹⁵ "Afghan-Iran border clash: Taliban says one killed," *BBC News*, 31 July 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/>.

¹⁶ Saraswat, "The Iranian Approach to the Taliban."

dynamics and facilitate economic connectivity due to its unique geographical, political, and economic attributes underscores its strategic importance on the global stage.

One of Iran's most valuable resources is its strategic location, which Zbigniew Brzezinski emphasized in his seminal book *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (1997). As a country "whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location" and "from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behavior of geostrategic players," Iran is classified as a pivot state by Brzezinski, a former US National Security Advisor. Because of their geographic location, geopolitical pivots are important because they can either make it easier to reach important areas or make it more difficult for powerful parties to obtain resources.¹⁷

Apart from Turkey, South Korea, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and other critical states in world politics, Iran stands out as a major player, especially in Eurasian geopolitics. Brzezinski highlights Iran's strong position along the Persian Gulf's eastern shoreline as well as its stabilizing support for political variety in Central Asia. Iran protects US interests in the Persian Gulf region from long-term Russian threats, notwithstanding Russia's animosity against the US. Brzezinski goes on to say that while Iran and Turkey are working to gain influence in the Caspian Sea–Central Asia region, their ability to make significant changes in the distribution of power within the region is constrained by internal issues.

Iran's influence extends along the Persian Gulf's sea lanes and connects the Caspian Sea/Central Asian region to the Indian Ocean through overland transit routes and ports like Chabahar. Iran is strategically positioned at the intersection of the energy-rich Caspian Sea region and the Persian Gulf region. Furthermore, Tehran's influence in the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, and Mediterranean regions is made possible by its substantial backing and ideological, political, and military ties to a number of groups, including the Assad regime in Syria, Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.¹⁸

Highlighting Iran's crucial geostrategic location, Robert Kaplan argues that "just as the Middle East is the quadrilateral for Afro-Eurasia, that is, for the World-Island, Iran is the Middle East's very own universal joint."¹⁹ Kaplan boldly proposes that the Halford Mackinder pivot that is, Heartland theory, which is currently situated in the steppes of Central Asia, be shifted southward to the Iranian plateau. Due to its strategic position, population, and oil resources in the Middle East, Iran plays a critical role in world geopolitics.

¹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 41.

¹⁸ Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography* (New York: Random House, 2013), 266–68.

¹⁹ Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, 269.

Kaplan and Brzezinski both emphasize how location is a key factor in understanding Iran's ongoing strategic significance and strength. The theory of pivot states is further developed by the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), which names ideational, military, and economic variables as crucial influencers.²⁰ Iran demonstrates characteristics in all three groups, as do Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and India. According to HCSS, pivot nations are enmeshed in the intersecting domains of influence of superpowers, which include associations involving military and economic accords, cultural ties, trade in weaponry and commodities, and rhetoric. Security in the area and beyond the world is significantly impacted by changes in a pivot state's affiliation. 22 countries worldwide are categorized as pivot states by the HCSS study, with Iran actively influencing its immediate security environment and highlighting the wider implications of its ideological orientation and future affiliations.

Due to its special location, Iran is at the meeting point of three continents: the Middle East, South Asia, and the post-Soviet area. All three areas, as well as the marine space in the northern Indian Ocean, are crucial to New Delhi's understanding of India's strategic and commercial objectives. As such, interaction with any entity that wields influence across the vast geostrategic arc spanning from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea and from the Caspian Sea to the Gulf of Aden becomes imperative for India.

Iran's role as a geostrategic hub has a vital role in determining regional and international dynamics. Iran is strategically significant because it is located at the intersection of three major regions: the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. This location affects a wide range of geopolitical and economic connections. However, challenges including international competition, rivalry within the region, and sanctions affect Iran's ability to use its position. Comprehending Iran's geopolitical significance is imperative for evaluating regional and worldwide geopolitical patterns and devising efficacious approaches to counteract its sway.

Overland Access to Central Asia and Russia:

India's strategic goals of geopolitical influence, energy security, and diverse commercial routes have driven its pursuit of overland connectivity to Central Asia and Russia. Iran, with its strategic location at the intersection of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, plays a key role in enabling this access. India's ability to link with the resource-rich and strategically important regions of Central Asia and Russia, avoiding the political and geographical barriers created by Pakistan, depends on the establishment of trade and transit corridors through Iran.

India's plan to connect with Russia and Central Asia depends on building the port of Chabahar, which is situated just beyond the Persian Gulf. Iran plays a key role in this plan.

²⁰ Tim Sweijs et al., *Why are Pivot States so Pivotal?: The Role of Pivot States in Regional and Global Security* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2014), 11.

Afghanistan is a stop on the routes that go through Chabahar and into Central Asia. As a result, it was necessary to build the supporting infrastructure, primarily the road that connects Zaranj and Delaram in Afghanistan. Also, a contemporary train line from the port to the border with Afghanistan was envisioned for Iran. It was anticipated that the project would increase trade, particularly with Afghanistan, between India and Central Asia. Iran would profit from a thriving commerce network and sophisticated infrastructure as the transit nation. Furthermore, India suggested that Chabahar be an essential stop along the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), a road, rail, and marine connection that would connect India with Russia and Eastern Europe via Iran and the Caspian Sea.²¹ As a result, the INSTC and the plans to connect with Central Asia and Russia would be complimentary, and Chabahar's contribution to this endeavor cannot be emphasized. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the INSTC is becoming a crucial hub for getting into Southeast and South Asian markets. Two Russian containers were transported via Iran to Mumbai, India in June 2022 from Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea. This was perceived as an experiment with the new commerce channels operated by INSTC.

One of the main reasons that the building of Chabahar was delayed from 2003 to 2015 was the tense relationship between Washington and Tehran around the Iranian nuclear program. Iran and the six superpowers struck a nuclear agreement in 2015. Iran agreed to restrict its nuclear program in exchange for the severe sanctions being lifted. It made it possible for further business interaction with Iran. A trilateral agreement was struck in 2016 by Afghanistan, Iran, and India for the development of Chabahar.²²

When the Chabahar port's first phase opened in December 2017, India was able to deliver wheat to Afghanistan and offer crucial humanitarian aid when the Covid-19 pandemic struck in 2020.²³ But now that the Taliban have taken control of Afghanistan, it is unclear what the future holds for Chabahar and the related connectivity projects. The Taliban's willingness to accept a commerce corridor through Chabahar connecting India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia is called into question given their openness to Chinese interests in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban are influenced by Pakistan, it is possible that they will oppose the expansion of overland trade through Chabahar since it would weaken Pakistan's position of power in Afghanistan.

²¹ "Address by External Affairs Minister on 'Chabahar Day' at the Maritime India Summit 2021" (transcript, Ministry of External Affairs, 4 March 2021), <https://mea.gov.in/>.

²² Ankit Panda, "India, Iran, Afghanistan Finalize Chabahar Port Agreement," *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

²³ Harsh V Pant, "India-Iran Cooperation at Chabahar Port: Choppy Waters," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.csis.org/>; and "India to use Chabahar port to send assistance to Afghanistan," *The Hindu*, 9 June 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

Notably, the port of Chabahar is situated close to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan, which was created by China. This is an important project for both countries, with geopolitical and economic ramifications for the Indian Ocean region as a whole. The significance of Gwadar to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is further highlighted by the country's aspirations to use Gwadar and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to link Xinjiang in western China to the Indian Ocean. Undermining Chabahar's potential therefore serves Pakistan's interests.²⁴

Despite being aware of Iran's strategically significant role in the geopolitics of Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, India chose to restrict its relationship with Iran in 2018–19 as the US under the Trump administration hardened its stance towards the country and reinstated sanctions. This included stopping oil imports. Consequently, Iran made a significant swing toward China.

It was revealed in 2021 that China and Iran had inked a 25-year deal to strengthen their strategic alliance. China will invest USD 400 billion in Iran in accordance with the agreement, and in exchange, China would obtain Iranian energy exports. There are plans to build transportation and connection between Iran and its neighbors, including Pakistan and Turkey. It is anticipated that Chinese businesses would be very important to it. Both sides benefit from the arrangement, which also creates new opportunities for collaboration.

The growing ties between China and Iran pose significant concerns for India. India's interests and operational space in the region will be compromised by the growing strategic partnership between China and Iran in Eurasia. Another chance for collaboration between China and Iran is Afghanistan.

An important component of India's regional connectivity strategy is its land-based route to both Russia and Central Asia via Iran. Building infrastructure such as Chabahar Port and the INSTC demonstrates India's dedication to creating safe, dependable, and effective trade routes that connect India to the center of Eurasia without passing through Pakistan.

Iran's position as a transit hub is crucial as India looks to safeguard its strategic interests in Russia and Central Asia. This presents both opportunities and problems in the ever-changing geopolitical landscape.

Security and Stability of the Persian Gulf:

India places a high priority on the security and stability of the Persian Gulf because of the region's centrality in the world's oil markets, its geopolitical relevance, and its influence on regional stability. Given its reliance on energy imports and its strategic interests in the larger Middle Eastern setting, India's foreign policy places a great deal of emphasis on the Persian Gulf, home to some of the world's greatest oil and gas reserves.

²⁴ Gurmeet Kanwal, "Pakistan's Gwadar Port: A New Naval Base in China's String of Pearls in the Indo-Pacific," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2 April, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/>.

The Strait of Hormuz, a strategically significant waterway, and the Persian Gulf are major areas of concern for Indian maritime security. This area is one of the Indian Navy's main "areas of maritime interest." New Delhi acknowledges the necessity to actively contribute to the security and stability of the Persian Gulf in light of the region's 7 million or so expatriates and the vital role that energy supplies from the region play in India's energy security.

Iran, which is located on the Gulf's northern coast, is very important to the strategic dynamics of the area. It has the potential to impact the geopolitical course in the Persian Gulf. However, Tehran's tense relations with the US and Gulf states like Saudi Arabia have made it difficult for the region to remain stable. Iran has made repeated threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, a vital chokepoint that would significantly affect the security of the world's energy supply. Furthermore, Iran has frequently been linked to instances involving attacks on ships and oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman.

For India's domestic energy security to be ensured, the Gulf must remain stable. Nonetheless, New Delhi is in a difficult situation because it wants to strengthen its ties with the US and the Gulf states while also protecting the region's stability. India's involvement in the Gulf region is impacted by the tense relations between Iran and the US as well as the US's allies in West Asia.

Trade between India and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) reached USD 121 billion in 2020–2021, with the Gulf accounting for around 60% of India's imports of oil.²⁵ With the intention of "establishing presence, providing a sense of reassurance to the Indian merchantmen... [and] monitor the ongoing situation [between the United States and Iran] and respond to any emergent crises," the Indian Navy launched Operation Sankalp in 2019 after realizing the substantial economic and energy interests involved.²⁶ Twenty-three Indian warships have been deployed to support the operation during the last two years. India's persistent interest in the region is demonstrated by its constant naval presence. India must remain actively involved in the Gulf due to Iran's actions and the reactions of other regional players.

India's foreign policy and strategic objectives are inextricably linked to the stability and security of the Persian Gulf. Given the region's importance as a geopolitical hotspot, economic partner, and significant energy provider, India must take a proactive and impartial stance. India plans to protect its interests and advance peace in the Persian Gulf by interacting diplomatically with important regional actors, attending to security issues, and supporting humanitarian and marine security initiatives.

Energy Security:

²⁵ Kirtika Suneja, "India considers reviving FTA talks with Gulf Cooperation Council," *Economic Times*, 10 April 2021.

²⁶ "Press Brief on Operation Sankalp" (press release, Press Information Bureau, 8 January 2020, [https:// pib.gov.in/](https://pib.gov.in/)).

India's foreign policy prioritizes energy security because the nation depends heavily on imported hydrocarbons to meet its expanding energy needs. Iran is important to India's energy policy because of its large natural gas and oil reserves. Opportunities and obstacles both influence India's relationship with Iran on energy-related matters, reflecting the larger geopolitical and economic forces at work.

After the US and China, India is the third-biggest energy consumer in the world. India is largely dependent on energy imports; over 60% of its oil needs come from West Asia. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq are the region's top oil suppliers.²⁷ In the past, Iran contributed significantly as a major oil supplier, making up around 10% of India's imports. After China, India was the country that imported the second-most Iranian oil in 2018–2019, averaging over 480,000 barrels per day.²⁸ However, India stopped importing Iranian oil in 2019 as a result of pressure from the US. Iran suffered a blow when it lost India as a significant client. India responded by boosting imports from the US and other Gulf nations to make up for the lack of Iranian oil. But as a result of this change, India's influence in its dealings with Iran diminished. In contrast, China strengthened its strategic alliance with Tehran by defying US pressure and continuing to import oil from Iran.

When oil prices started to climb globally in 2021, India thought about starting to import more Iranian oil. Iran has a significant role in India's dynamics around energy security due to its close vicinity and oil production capacity. Furthermore, several Indian refineries on the western coast are equipped to handle Iranian crude oil. It makes sense from a practical standpoint for these refineries to import Iranian oil and process it for both domestic and international markets. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significantly raised the importance of oil exporting nations like Iran. Reintroducing Iranian energy exports into the market would have a direct impact on Russia in addition to relieving the pressure caused by growing energy costs. Energy exports are a major source of income for the Russian government, and rising prices have helped to finance the war in Ukraine. A developing nation such as India is immediately impacted by high energy prices in terms of domestic stability. Thus, it becomes essential to resume Iranian oil imports in order to reduce public unrest.

So, Iran's enormous natural gas and oil reserves give it a prominent place in India's framework for energy security. In spite of obstacles presented by global sanctions and geopolitical unrest, India's involvement with Iran is indicative of its overarching approach to broadening its energy portfolio and guaranteeing consistent supply. Future developments in India-Iran energy

²⁷ US Energy Information Administration, "India," 30 September 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/>.

²⁸ Nidhi Verma and Julia Payne, "Indian, European refiners get ready to buy Iranian oil," Reuters, 19 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

cooperation will be shaped by the construction of energy infrastructure and the management of intricate geopolitical dynamics.

Engagement with West Asia:

A major source of tension in West Asian geopolitics is the growing strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran as well as Washington's allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. These rivalries, which put Shia Iran against Sunni nations in the Gulf, frequently include a religious component. Iran is being isolated and has less influence in the area as a result of the harsh tactics that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have adopted. Their goals haven't been entirely met, though. Iran's partner, the Assad dictatorship, continues to rule Syria, and the conflict in Yemen rages on. Over the past ten years, there has been a great deal of volatility in the area. Diplomats from Saudi Arabia and Iran started holding backchannel discussions to ease tensions between the two rivals in the region in order to address this. Both nations have pledged to reduce their strategic rivalry and reopen embassies as part of a recent accord mediated by China.

India is keen to fortify its relations with all of the key actors in West Asia, particularly in light of the current complicated geopolitical situation. Nonetheless, India's involvement in the region is also impacted by Iran's actions. Without picking a side in the continuing rivalry, New Delhi has worked to establish solid relationships with all of the main regional players. In actuality, India has recently made political capital investments to strengthen its strategic ties to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel.

As part of the I2-U2 quadrilateral initiative, New Delhi is also involved with the United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. Although some experts characterize this group as anti-Iranian, the United Arab Emirates and India disagree with this interpretation. They acknowledge Iran's significance and worth in the geopolitical context of South and West Asia. India was forced to curtail its contacts with Tehran as a result of the US strategy of "maximum pressure" on Iran during the Trump administration. Nonetheless, New Delhi is reevaluating its strategic priorities in light of the changing geostrategic landscape in South-West Asia. India's recent diplomatic overtures and visits to Iran highlight Iran's continued strategic importance in the geopolitics of Afghanistan and West Asia.

Conclusion:

The intricate relationship between India and Iran epitomizes a strategic conundrum shaped by a complex interplay of regional and global forces. As India navigates its foreign policy in the context of Iran's pivotal role in the geopolitics of South and Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and beyond, several key considerations emerge.

Firstly, Iran's status as a geopolitical pivot, with its strategic location bridging South Asia and

Central Asia, underscores its importance in India's regional strategy. The development of infrastructure like the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) highlights India's efforts to secure overland access to Central Asia and Russia, bypassing the constraints imposed by Pakistan. This infrastructure is crucial for enhancing trade, energy security, and regional influence.

Secondly, India's energy security is intricately linked to its relationship with Iran. Despite the challenges posed by international sanctions and geopolitical tensions, Iran remains a significant source of crude oil and natural gas for India. Ensuring a stable and diversified energy supply is central to India's long-term energy strategy, making continued engagement with Iran essential.

Furthermore, the stability of the Persian Gulf is of paramount importance to India. As a major importer of energy from the Gulf region, India's economic and strategic interests are closely tied to the security and stability of this vital maritime corridor. India's diplomatic efforts aim to balance relationships with key Gulf states while addressing regional security concerns and promoting peace.

The evolving dynamics of Iran-China relations add another layer of complexity to India's strategic calculations. As Iran deepens its ties with China through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India must carefully navigate its own strategic and economic interests while maintaining a balanced approach in its engagements with both Iran and China.

In summary, the "Iran Conundrum" reflects the broader challenges and opportunities facing India as it seeks to advance its strategic imperatives in a shifting regional landscape. By leveraging its diplomatic, economic, and strategic tools, India aims to address the complexities of its relationship with Iran while pursuing its broader objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. The outcome of this delicate balancing act will have far-reaching implications for India's role and influence in the evolving global order.

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