



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 8.031 (SJIF 2025)

Afghanistan as factor India –Iran Relations

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686**

DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2025-75447577/IRJHIS2512008>

Abstract:

Afghanistan plays an important role in establishing relations between India and Iran. Historical, political, economic, and cultural and security issues are important between the three countries. This article mentions the impact of cordial relations between the three countries and the impact of bad relations. The trilateral relationship between India, Iran, and Afghanistan is primarily defined by shared geopolitical interests, regional connectivity (especially the Chabahar Port project), and mutual security concerns regarding terrorism and Pakistan's influence. The dynamic is complex, influenced heavily by US sanctions on Iran and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Chabahar Port, Afghanistan, IS-KP, sanctions, Central Asian

Introduction:

Iran and Afghanistan shared a 921 km border which ran through several deserts and marshlands and flanked the Afghan provinces of Herat, Farah and Nimruz. The two countries also shared several religious, linguistic and ethnic groups that created a cultural overlap between the two neighbors. Iran, presently, has a population of 90 million, Iran ranks 17th globally in both geographic size and population and is the sixth-largest country in Asia. It is one of the world's few Shia-majority States. On the other hand, Afghanistan is predominately a Sunni Muslim country. India and Afghanistan have a strong relationship based on historical and cultural links. India has played a significant role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Moreover, the Strategic Partnership Agreement reinforced the strong, vibrant and multi-faceted relations between the two countries. The border between India and Afghanistan is known as the Durand Line and is approximately 106 km long. This border is located in the Wakhan Corridor and is technically shared through the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, which is disputed and administered by Pakistan.

Afghanistan plays a significant role in India-Iran relations, serving as a crucial factor in shaping their strategic partnership. Both countries share a common interest in ensuring stability and

security in Afghanistan, which is vital for regional connectivity and economic growth. India and Iran have been collaborating to develop Afghanistan's infrastructure, including the Chabahar Port, which provides India with an alternative trade route to Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan. This port is expected to boost trade between India, Iran, and Afghanistan, and enhance regional connectivity. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 has led to a shift in India's approach, with New Delhi engaging with the Taliban government to safeguard its interests and promote regional stability. Iran, too, has been engaging with the Taliban, seeking to protect its interests and prevent instability in the region.

Afghanistan is a crucial and multi-faceted factor in India-Iran relations, serving primarily as a point of strategic convergence and a necessary corridor for regional connectivity, but also introducing complexities due to its internal instability and the influence of external powers. Afghanistan is a crucial and multifaceted factor in India-Iran relations, serving as both a point of strategic convergence and a source of geopolitical friction, largely influenced by third-party dynamics, particularly the United States and Pakistan. Both India and Iran share core interests in a stable and secure Afghanistan, free from extremism, but their approaches and the broader regional context create complexities in their bilateral relationship.

Key Areas of Convergence:

- **Chabahar Port Development:** This is the centerpiece of the trilateral cooperation. India is developing the Shahid Beheshti port in Chabahar, Iran, to create a trade and transit route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that bypasses Pakistan.
 - In May 2016, a trilateral agreement was signed for this purpose.
 - In May 2024, India signed a 10-year agreement with Iran for the operation of the port's terminal.
 - The port has been used for humanitarian aid and trade, with the Taliban government in Afghanistan also expressing interest and investing in the project to reduce dependence on Pakistani ports.
 - The trilateral relationship is seen as a counter to other regional projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
- **Political and Security Cooperation:** Historically, India and Iran both supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime in the 1990s.
 - Both nations share concerns about the rise of extremist groups (like IS-KP) and their potential to destabilize the region.
 - Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, India has not formally recognized the Taliban government but maintains engagement through a technical mission in Kabul and humanitarian aid, while Iran has also engaged with the Taliban regime due to shared border

and security concerns.

- India participates in regional dialogue formats, such as the Moscow Format Consultations, alongside Iran and other nations to discuss the future of Afghanistan.
- **Economic and Development Aid:** India has historically been a significant development partner for Afghanistan, investing over \$3 billion in infrastructure projects like the Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam) and the Afghan Parliament building.
 - Iran has served as a critical transit hub for trade between India and Afghanistan, particularly for Afghan exports like dry fruits and carpets and Indian exports of pharmaceuticals and textiles.
- **Regional Connectivity and Trade:** Afghanistan is landlocked, and Iran's Chabahar Port is vital for providing India a direct sea-land trade route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. The development of the port and associated road/rail infrastructure (such as the Zaranj-Delaram highway built by India) is a shared strategic interest that deepens their cooperation.
- **Shared Security Concerns:** Both India and Iran have historically supported inclusive governance in Afghanistan and are wary of a dominant, Pakistan-backed Taliban regime. They share common concerns regarding the proliferation of terrorism (including groups like ISIS-KP), drug trafficking, and the potential influx of refugees resulting from instability, which incentivizes cooperation on security and intelligence.
- **Countering External Influence:** India and Iran both use their engagement in Afghanistan to counter the influence of Pakistan and, to some extent, China, which has its own interests and growing presence in the region.
- **Countering Pakistani Influence:** Both India and Iran view a stable Afghanistan as a way to limit Pakistan's influence in the region, which often acts against their respective interests.

Points of Complexity and Divergence:

- **US Sanctions on Iran:** American sanctions have been a major impediment to the full realization of the India-Iran strategic partnership, forcing India to balance its relationship with Iran with its ties to the US. India has had to drastically reduce oil imports from Iran and progress on the Chabahar port has sometimes been slow due to financing and procurement complications, despite receiving specific waivers for the project under the previous US administration.
- **Political Shifts in Afghanistan:** The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 presented a challenge, as neither India nor Iran officially recognizes the current regime, though both have engaged in pragmatic, one-to-one discussions with the Taliban to safeguard their interests. India has a "technical team" stationed in its embassy in Kabul, and Iran has also engaged with the group to manage border issues and regional stability.
- **Ideological and Geopolitical Alignment Differences:** Despite convergence on Afghanistan,

India and Iran differ on other key foreign policy issues. India is a defense partner of the US and embedded in the Indo-Pacific framework, while Iran is working more closely with China and Russia to counter the US-led order, creating a structural dissonance that can affect the reliability of their partnership. In essence, Afghanistan acts as a "binder" for the India-Iran relationship, compelling them to work together out of shared regional necessity, even as external pressures and differing global alignments create friction in their broader relations.

- **Internal Instability:** The ongoing security concerns, poverty, and political instability within Afghanistan hinder the implementation of joint infrastructure projects and large-scale investments, regardless of the bilateral intentions of India and Iran.
- **Regional Power Dynamics:** Russia and China's growing influence and coordination in Central Asia and their outreach to the Taliban (often excluding India from key dialogue platforms like the extended Troika meetings) put pressure on the India-Iran dynamic.

The Geopolitical Context (Post-2001):

Following the overthrow of the first Taliban regime in 2001, India and Iran both adopted a similar approach toward Afghanistan, favoring an inclusive, representative government and historically collaborating against extremist influence. India pursued a "soft-power" strategy, providing substantial developmental and humanitarian aid, funding over 500 projects across Afghanistan, including the construction of the Afghan Parliament and the Salma Dam.

Iran, sharing a border and significant Shia population links with Afghanistan, also sought stability but maintained a pragmatic approach, engaging with various Afghan factions, including the Taliban, to secure its national interests.

A major shared strategic objective has been to bypass Pakistan for regional connectivity. This convergence of interests led to the conceptualization and development of the Chabahar Port in Iran.

Chabahar Port: The Linchpin of Connectivity:

The Chabahar Port project, formally cemented by a trilateral agreement in 2016, is the cornerstone of the India-Iran-Afghanistan relationship. Its strategic importance is multifaceted:

- **Bypassing Pakistan:** It offers landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asian nations a viable and safe trade route to the sea, circumventing reliance on Pakistani ports.
- **Economic Gateway:** It is a key node in the ambitious International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), aiming to reduce transit times and costs for trade between India, Iran, Russia, and Europe.
- **Counterbalancing China:** The project is widely seen as India's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) has been operating the Shahid Beheshti terminal since December 2018, and in May 2024, a landmark 10-year contract was signed for its continued

operation, signifying India's long-term commitment despite the challenges posed by U.S. sanctions on Iran.

The Post-2021 Shift and Current Dynamics (2024-2025):

The Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul in August 2021 fundamentally altered the dynamics. India initially closed its embassy and adopted a wait-and-watch approach, but has since shifted to a cautious, pragmatic engagement with the Taliban administration for humanitarian and trade reasons. Recent developments in 2024-2025 highlight this strategic reset:

- **Direct Engagement:** High-level meetings between Indian diplomats and Taliban ministers have taken place, focusing on trade and security.
- **Chabahar as a Key Route:** The port has become even more critical due to deteriorating Afghanistan-Pakistan trade relations. In a significant move, the Taliban administration in March 2024 announced plans to invest \$35 million in the port, signaling their intent to diversify their trade routes away from Pakistan.
- **Iran's Pragmatism:** While not formally recognizing the Taliban government, Iran maintains an active political and economic relationship with Kabul, facilitating dialogue and working on joint connectivity projects like the Khaf-Herat railway line, which links the Afghan city of Herat to Iran's rail network.

Challenges and Future Prospects:

The trilateral relationship faces significant hurdles, primarily the impact of oscillating U.S. sanctions on Iran, which create an unpredictable business environment and deter large-scale investment. Political instability in Afghanistan and the international community's non-recognition of the Taliban regime also pose challenges. However, the mutual desire for regional stability and economic connectivity, particularly through the operationalization of Chabahar and its related infrastructure like the Zaranj-Delaram road and Khaf-Herat railway, provides a strong foundation for continued, albeit cautious, cooperation between India, Iran, and Afghanistan. The shared goal of countering regional terrorism and the influence of rival powers ensures that these three nations will remain strategically intertwined in the evolving South and Central Asian geopolitical landscape.

In conclusion, while Afghanistan provides a compelling reason for India and Iran to cooperate strategically, the complex interplay of regional rivalries, domestic politics, and the overriding influence of global powers like the United States means that this shared interest has not yet translated into a fully seamless or consistent strategic partnership. The trilateral relationship faces challenges including US sanctions on Iran which create a complex balancing act for India, the ongoing political instability and security issues within Afghanistan, and regional competition from other players like China and Pakistan.

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