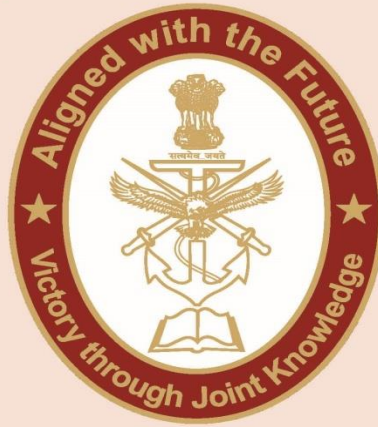


# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

### IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN: STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR INDIA



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1. The term **Middle East** was used by the British to qualify a region west of British India and even encompassed certain areas of North Africa. The term is still used by US albeit excludes Africa<sup>1</sup>. Today West Asia is a more acceptable term and refers to countries west of Afghanistan to the western most part of Asia but excludes Israel, Turkey and Iran<sup>2</sup>. From the fables of Aladdin to the romantic literature of Ferdowsi, Middle East has charmed every soul in the world through its mystically different traditions. The area is mostly a desert and the geography has impacted all political, social and economic aspects of the region<sup>3</sup>. Imagine living in a place with very less water and extremely harsh climate. Only the fittest survive and this gave rise to a **feudal system of governance**. It was the protection of the family first, the villages next and thereafter the towns or cities. The system was based on fierce loyalty towards the Chieftain so as to protect self, family and villages. The harsh living conditions meant that the villages were always prone to raid from nearby villages for resources. Staying together as a bunch increased chances of survival many fold. The great kings and empires of the area were created by leaders who could combine the various

<sup>1</sup> "Middle East - The World Factbook," accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/middle-east/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Suchak Patel Asked: What Is the Difference between 'West Asia' and 'Middle East' from the Indian Perspective? | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses," accessed February 21, 2022, <https://idsa.in/askanexpert/west-asia-and-middle-east-from-the-indian-perspective>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Deserts Of Asia - WorldAtlas," accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-deserts-of-asia.html>.

villages and cities as one unit. **The system has persisted in this region till today. There is monarchy in many countries even today and in lesser developed areas, regional commanders hold the power.** There is a reason why Islam spread fast in these areas. The religion was a great uniting factor creating the aspect of Muslim brotherhood. Islam invoked greater loyalty as the regional bias was further strengthened by a greater cause.

2. The area also borders different societies and different worlds which for the local inhabitant, could never be trusted as they were elementarily different from the very race itself. Middle East has thus been a battle ground throughout history. Fighting against foreign forces and fighting within for resources; all at various levels created a harsh society with a battle hardened populace. **Even the most extreme living conditions and undeniable odds didn't faze the inhabitants; an aspect which still exists in the society.** The fierce warriors fought through the crusades ultimately defining the boundaries of continents as we know today. They endured the ruthless invasions of the Mongols, ultimately pushing their enemies back even though the fight lasted for generations. **The population had learnt to endure and was ready to continue fighting as long as it took to protect its identity.** The dynamics of the social system of the area which have been forged over the ages is difficult to understand for an outsider.

3. Any doubts of being on the receiving end of God's stick due to geography were about to change. The turn of the nineteenth century ushered in the industrial revolution and the discovery of oil in the region changed the dynamics. The Gods finally smiled and gifted Middle East the most precious commodity of all - oil. Any previous doubts of being created in a lesser world were eliminated as this area commanded the largest known reserves of crude. Regrettably this also brought the region again into the forefront and this time amidst the white man's world. Despite having some great kingdoms and political forges, Middle East was no match to the shrewdness of the West. Countries lined up to woo the owner of oil fields which brought in unprecedented amounts of wealth but the area was also caught in battles between the superpowers – USA and USSR. The battle lines between the superpowers and their ability to divide and rule still affects the area miserably. An area which as yet holds the most precious commodity in the world remains extremely volatile. Gods did not smile after all. An area which should have prospered beyond imagination remains amongst the most unsafe places in the world. The world politics prevented West Asia to settle. Unending rifts leading to mass violence has moved across the area over the time. Iran on the Eastern flank of Middle East and Afghanistan are today at the centre stage of world politics and probable

violence. In India MEA handles the area as a part of PAI or Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran desk<sup>4</sup>.

4. These two countries sit at crossroads of conflict with the west. Despite differences amongst the Islamic world, Afghanistan and Iran inspire respect for having stood up to the mighty US. **Whether these countries would grow into a more prosperous country to live in or plunge into economic crisis and darkness is a question being explored today. But one thing is for certain. As things are today, both these nations can contribute significantly towards economic, political and social stability of India.** These nations are volatile, fiercely independent and sit on potential gold mines of minerals. Any and every country would like to maintain cordial relations with these countries. However, enhancement of relations with these countries is risky business in world politics. India has to tread carefully. The quantum of engagement has to be weighed carefully. India has to measure and move its relations individually with these countries and also as a combined unit. The options of India would also be dependent on Iran and Afghanistan's relations with other countries, and as also India's relations with them. Relations of these countries with US (including NATO nations), Russia, Central Asian Republics, Gulf, China and Pakistan are particularly relevant when studied along with historical implications and geography to arrive at certain meaningful strategic engagement options for India.

### **ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN**

5. Iran has been amongst the oldest civilisations of the world, a cultural hub and a military might in the past. Persia as it was called earlier had the Achaemenid Empire which till then was the largest single empire the world had seen. The empire lasted from approximately 559 B.C.E. to 331 B.C.E. The Achaemenid Empire was able to expand westward touching boundary up to Greece, however couldn't push eastwards into India with major success. India too was rising under the Magadha Empire and the two civilizations clashed and a boundary till Indus river under Cyrus was established. Subsequently Darius was able to push it till Jhelum.<sup>5</sup> The boundary stayed till Alexander was able to destroy the Persian Empire<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently the Indian Maurya dynasty was able to push back and Under Chandragupta Maurya, the Indians captured most of what is today

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<sup>4</sup> "MEA | About MEA : Organization Structure : Divisions," accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/divisions.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> "Iranian (Achaemenid) Empire and India | Shaalaa.Com," accessed February 5, 2022, [https://www.shaalaa.com/concept-notes/iranian-achaemenid-empire-and-india\\_13690](https://www.shaalaa.com/concept-notes/iranian-achaemenid-empire-and-india_13690).

<sup>6</sup> "Persian Empire | National Geographic Society," accessed February 5, 2022, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/persian-empire/>.

Afghanistan<sup>7</sup>. Historically there were two kingdoms with different ideologies at war. Though the exchange of culture between bordering states is inevitable, the interaction and engagement with Persia started almost a millennium later. By this time the Persian Empire had fought the Romans and ultimately lost to the Arabs. In seventh century Islamisation of Iran had begun. The conversion unlike other parts of Arab land was a lengthy process. Iranians were previously Zoroastrians and resisted the spread of Islam. **Ultimately Iran was converted to Islam but they retained certain practices of Zoroastrianism. They fiercely rejected Arabic as national language and persisted with Persian.** Iran was now a Sunni Islamic nation but despite the factual migration of Parsi community to India during the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Iran probably wasn't as hardliner as the other Arab nations. Post the fall of Gupta dynasty, India was more divided and this is the time the Arabs had started invasions of India. They were initially defeated till the success of Mohammad Bin Quasim<sup>8</sup>. Subsequently, the Islamic rulers started to invade India with different dynasties ruling the Delhi Sultanate. **It is pertinent to highlight that despite Islamic rulers in power, India remained a Hindu state fiercely resisting conversion.** The real interaction between Iran and India came during the period of Mughal Dynasty. Persian was declared as the court language and the Persian architecture style was liberally utilised. But by this time both sides were Islamic and then they started fighting with each other<sup>9</sup>. It may be noted that at this time there was no state called Afghanistan. The boundaries of India and Persia stabilised somewhere near Kandhar. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Safavid dynasty came to power in Iran and over the next three centuries, Iran became a Shia country. Apparently this conversion was also forced and gave rise to blood enmity between Shia's and Sunni's<sup>10</sup>. India and Iran remained opposing and through the conquests of Nadir Shah and Maharana Ranjit Singh, the boundary remained stabilised in the area of what is presently Afghanistan. India was now under colonial rule. UK rivalry with Russia was evolving resulting in a weaker Iran and ultimately led to the creation of Afghanistan. **The history of Persia and India till the time India became independent is difficult to be classified as cordial. Possibly more antagonistic as Iran and India were two great civilisations which were now weakened and under the influence of two superpowers of the world then – UK and Russia.**

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<sup>7</sup> "Maurya Empire during Ashoka 265 BCE," accessed February 5, 2022, <https://www.mapsofindia.com/history/mauryan-empire-ashoka-265-bce.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "West and Central Asia between the 10th and 12th Centuries, Turkish Advance towards India, The Ghurian Invasions – SELF STUDY HISTORY," accessed February 7, 2022, <https://selfstudyhistory.com/2014/12/24/1-medieval-india-west-and-central-asia-between-the-10th-and-12th-centuries-and-turkish-advance-towards-india/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Foreign Policy of the Mughals and Their Relations with Central Asia," accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/foreign-policy-of-the-mughals-and-their-relations-with-central-asia/2842>.

<sup>10</sup> "The Incredibly Bloody Safavid Conversion of Iran to Shia Islam | Pakistan Defence," accessed February 7, 2022, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/the-incredibly-bloody-safavid-conversion-of-iran-to-shia-islam.503633/>.

6. Formal relation between India and Iran were established on 15 Mar 1950. Since then, 12 times the political heads have visited each other's country, each visit held a promise, however, the relation couldn't blossom adequately<sup>11</sup>. There has been far too much effect of external agencies rather than bilateral focus. One would be constrained to call Iran as an all weather friend like Russia or formerly the USSR. There have been times when India and Iran were seen on the opposite sides despite no show of any hostilities against one another. Early into 1950's, Iran leaned towards US becoming signatory of Baghdad Pact and Central Treaty Organisation<sup>12</sup> whereas India followed the Non Aligned Movement. In times to come, India got support of USSR and despite being a NAM country was divided into the USSR block. Nehru's endorsement of Gamal Abdel Nasser as the leader of the Arab world and of his policies were unappreciated by the Shah of Iran and his closeness to Pakistan was unfavorable for India. Iran however was a liberalized state while being aligned to US. Iran's policies to gain prominence in Arab world by projecting as a state with Islamic leaning further kept relations with India at bay. Iran and India relation did decline due to Iran's support to Pakistan both in the 1965 and 1971 conflict, where Iran had provided both material and diplomatic support to Pakistan, but oil supply to India continued without impediments. Post the 1979 revolution, life in Iran changed drastically but still they are viewed lesser hardliner compared to some other Islamic countries. India to some extent endorsed the revolution with an unofficial goodwill delegation led by Sri Ashok Mehta, but soon Iran became more Islamic lending vocal support to Pakistan on Kashmir issue<sup>13</sup>. Even till date the Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khomeini periodically issues statements on Kashmir the last one being in 2019. The 80's was also the time when the radicalization of Islam started in the form of Mujahids. These so called holy warriors were all Sunni. Having lost favours in the Arab world, the Shia Iran was concerned and collaborated with India in support of assisting Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. Relation again took a warm turn in the 1990's with several high level delegations but nothing concrete emerged except for an increased number of Iranian students in India.

7. Early in 21<sup>st</sup> century, India's relation with US started to change. Despite Indian PM visit to Iran and Iran's President being Chief Guest on Republic Day Parade 2003, India stood against a nuclear Iran and in **2009 India voted against Iran** allegedly under the pressure from US, in a resolution passed by UN watchdog for atomic expansion IAEA censuring

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<sup>11</sup> "Embassy of India Tehran \*\*\* India-Iran Relations," n.d.

<sup>12</sup> "The Baghdad Pact (1955) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)," accessed February 8, 2022, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/98683.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> "Embassy of India Tehran \*\*\* India-Iran Relations."

the Islamic nation over its controversial nuclear programme demand. In 2013 India went ahead and signed and kept the crude oil import with Iran, yet again under US pressure stopped imports prior to signing of JCPOA in 2015. The relations again improved with the visit of Indian PM in 2016. This is the time development of Chabahar port; an engagement which was started in 2003 was signed<sup>14</sup>. The import of oil also restarted. India was to develop terminal and cargo berths on the port at an estimated investment of USD 200 million. A train from Chabahar to Zehadan was also to be built with Indian cooperation. Yet again, **after the Trump government walked out of JCPOA in 2018, oil import stopped in 2019 and the development of Chabahar also moved at snail's pace.** Since the time of Indian independence, both countries have followed their respective agenda and the historical similarities of civilization were unable to overcome the situational differences. Sincere efforts were made for better relations but from **1950 till date the relation with Iran can be summarized as on and off but overall amiable.**

8. **Nevertheless, the relationship with Iran has to be considered from an overriding factor of racial similarity.** Both nations are of brown race and shared a common border for generations. The border areas which changed hands of both Indian and Persian conquerors had to be culturally linked to both nations with culture of ruler being followed without forgetting the other side. Thus the Buddhist monuments in Afghanistan survived centuries and Iranian influence on Humayun Tomb is still visible. More similarities in eating, dressing and cultural systems are thus inevitable. This cultural similarity and firsthand knowledge gave a special identity to the countries in eyes of each other. It is very easy to relate to an Iranian unlike many other nations. The relations between the two countries haven't blossomed but once interaction starts, even items of daily use could be traded or maybe even bartered with one another with ease. **A natural understanding of Iran and its culture exists with India and vice versa.**

9. The relationship with Iran transcends to both economic and strategic interests. While India is increasing ties with the United States, it still ultimately seeks to progress toward an era of prosperity and power both diplomatically and militarily. Iran is also progressing on a similar policy hence Iran and India's long-term agendas align to some extent. The degree of engagement and mutual growth with Iran is majorly affected by the US. Today India views US as a major economic and strategic partner of the future, Iran –US relations would require a miracle to improve in the near future particularly after the declassified documents confirmed US role in

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<sup>14</sup> "Modi's Visit to Iran: The Takeaway from Tehran - The Hindu," accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/modis-visit-to-iran-the-takeaway-from-tehran/article8646427.ece>.

toppling a government in Iran in 1953<sup>15</sup>. Towards serving India's interest both economically & strategically, the Indian policy towards Iran shall closely consider the importance of Iran for India which are as under:-

(a) **Location - Both Geo-Political and Geo Strategic.** Iran sits at the gateway of India's path to Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan, and West Asia and potentially through the **International North South Corridor**, to Russia and even Europe. There already exists a railway line from Bandar Abbas to Amirabad Port on Caspian and railway line from Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran was inaugurated by the Presidents of the 3 countries in December 2014. Chabahar remains crucial for the same and India expects it to be included in the INSTC. Certain amount of infrastructure exists and more could be developed based on the trade requirements. Port and railway line to the northern states would be hugely beneficial for the India<sup>16</sup>. This will boost trade between Europe, Russia and tap the currently underutilized market of the Central Asian Republics all while bypassing Pakistan and Afghanistan. As compared to the current route through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea, the INSTC is much shorter and cost effective. The Suez Canal route takes 45- 60 days, whereas the INSTC would take 25-30 days. In fact, the INSTC is 40 per cent shorter and 30 per cent cheaper<sup>17</sup>. **Chabahar is also to be considered as a counter to Gwadar Port in Pakistan** and could be used in future to dock sea based weapon systems for a Chinese threat emanating from Gwadar. **Iran also sits at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz and thus has the potential to block the same in case of hostilities.** With the Houthi rebels in Yemen under control of Iran, Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb (between South Yemen and Djibouti) could also be utilized by Iran in a clandestine way. Though it is unlikely that Iran would implement the same openly, Iran can affect the area with militia and small boats<sup>18</sup>.

(b) **Energy Security.** The requirement of crude oil is going to increase in India owing to the population size and booming industry. Prior to 2019, India was importing approx 11.6% oil from Iran,<sup>19</sup> but post the US sanctions, oil from Iran has almost stopped. India has a well diversified source base for oil supply, but the most convenient

<sup>15</sup> "CIA Confirms Role in 1953 Iran Coup," accessed February 8, 2022, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/>.

<sup>16</sup> "PM Modi's Visit to Iran | Vivekananda International Foundation," accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2016/june/07/pm-modi-s-visit-to-iran>.

<sup>17</sup> Meena Singh Roy, "International North-South Transport Corridor: Re-Energising India's Gateway to Eurasia IDSA ISSUE BRIEF," 2015, <http://www.instc-org.ir/>.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "CRS Report for Congress Iran's Threat to the Strait of Hormuz," 2012, [www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov).

<sup>19</sup> "List Of Countries From Where India Imports Crude Oil | India e Info," accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.indiaefinfo.com/list-of-countries-from-where-india-imports-crude-oil/>.

remains from the Gulf countries. Other nations which supply oil to India like the US or Brazil increase the travel time, transport cost, losses and increase vulnerability due to distance. Iran is the closest oil supplier (besides China and Pakistan<sup>20</sup>). A company SAGE had offered to lay an undersea gas pipeline from Iran to India bypassing Pakistan and with Iran already having a Gas pipeline till Chabahar, it's a lucrative proposition. Gas can also be imported from Afghanistan. The trade can be offset with these countries in exchange for India strong export goods like medical supply, engineering and education etc. Currently Iraq is the largest supplier of oil to India<sup>21</sup>, but with the US withdrawing from Iraq, question on a stable supply would remain. With a struggling Iranian economy and a strong requirement from India, it would be a win-win situation for both countries.

(c) **Fight Against Terrorism.** It is a well known that the biggest exporter of terrorism to India and as such the world is Pakistan. This export can be reduced by putting pressure on Pakistan through diplomacy. Though Iran has supported Pakistan earlier during 1965 and 1971 wars, the Shia population of Iran are unlikely to be supportive of Sunni Pakistan. Furthermore, Iran does follow a system of democracy and in comparison to other Sunni nations is probably more liberal particularly in terms of women rights. Even if Iran avoids direct support to Pakistan by adopting a neutral position, it shall be beneficial for India. Regrettably every now and then the Iran issues statements on Kashmir which do not go well with India. But India has to work diplomatically to stop these. India and Iran can particularly work together on Afghanistan. For both the nations, Afghanistan is immediate neighbour. Opium trade, refugees and security are serious concerns for Iran which has worked both with the Afghan government and Taliban prior to US withdrawal. The Fatemiyoun Brigade, a militia comprising of Afghan Shias that was deployed in Syria to fight against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) is now back in Afghanistan and thus gives substantial lien to Iran in Taliban controlled Afghanistan<sup>22</sup>. Iran and Haqqani's who hold prominence in Taliban government have fought previously and thus Iran remains concerned about security threats from Afghanistan. Iran and India can thus work together in managing their interests in the Taliban controlled Taliban. Iran requires India's assistance to come out of years of economic depravity

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<sup>20</sup> "India Imports Petrol, Diesel from China - The Economic Times," accessed February 8, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/india-imports-petrol-diesel-from-china/articleshow/57650565.cms>.

<sup>21</sup> "Crude Oil Imports by Country 2020," accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.worldstopexports.com/crude-oil-imports-by-country/>.

<sup>22</sup> "India, Iran, and the Afghanistan Crisis | ORF," accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-iran-and-the-afghanistan-crisis/>.



and India requires Iran to enforce its lien in Afghanistan if situation requires.

(d) **Trade**. Cordial relations with nations ultimately develop with better trade and exchanges. Iran and India have a huge potential of benefitting through more direct trade which goes beyond to oil. The Iranian economy did survived despite harsh US sanctions displaying resilience and alternate sectors for manufacturing<sup>23</sup>. Besides oil, Iran has an export base of petrochemicals, chemicals, dry fruits and handicraft work. Indian population size can absorb these exports seamlessly. India has in abundance what Iran requires. The soft power elements like medical services, software industry, education, film industry agricultural products etc can all be exported to Iran. The soft power elements have the potential of touching daily lives of Irani's bringing them closer to India. India can establish hospitals, spearhead hospitality & services industry, get students for Indian colleges etc. The similarity of race can assist both countries in this regard.

(e) **Global Dynamics**. The current global dynamics developing into an aggressive stance are the most important for India in shaping its policy towards Iran who stands confronting the US, Arab world, Israel and almost the entire European Union. On the other hand, Iran is developing ties with China, Russia and certain Central Asian Republics. India maintains following the Non Aligned Policy but since the turn of century, has grown close to US and at the same time maintaining relations with Russia. India has the potential to be a great diplomatic power as it can balance the new power equation and Iran offers an opportunity. India could be a stabilising power of world politics over Iran. The stand-off between US and Russia in Ukraine and growing Chinese influence gives rise to a possible alliance between Russia – China –Turkey – Iran and Pakistan. Such an eventuality would be majorly detrimental to Indian interests of trade and security. India thus requires investing in Iran without awaiting outcome of JCPOA negotiations.

(f) **China Factor**. Two developing economies of Asia China and India have competed on various aspects to secure owns interest. Iran is one such place. As a follow up of the **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership** which was announced in 2016, on 27 Mar 2021, Iran and China signed a 25 year cooperative agreement. As per reports, China would invest USD 400 Billion in exchange for assured supply of oil.

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<sup>23</sup> "Why Iran's Economy Has Not Collapsed Amid U.S. Sanctions And 'Maximum Pressure' : NPR," accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/16/796781021/why-irans-economy-has-not-collapsed-amid-u-s-sanctions-and-maximum-pressure>.

This also signals growing interests of China in the Arab world. Though, the USD 400 Billion figure appears to be unrealistic. In 2018 Chinese FDI in Iran was US 3.23 Billion and since the signing of agreement, no visible investment project has taken place. However, China is likely to utilise Iran as another opportunity for promoting its mega investments and connectivity projects in the Gulf and West Asia under the aegis of the BRI. China also views both ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar as a means to rejuvenate Maritime Silk Route and an alternate to CPEC. India with a commitment of USD 1 Billion is developing the port. Post signing of Iran – China pact, news emerged that India was dropped by Iran developing from Chabahar - Zahedan railway, later though MEA confirmed of no such news was true. The incident goes to show the precarious and high-risk nature of India's investment, and how China may hold the power to push India away from the region. India thus needs to move fast and expand its scope of engagement with Tehran to counter some Chinese effect. It might be difficult to challenge the Chinese economic might at present but the racial and cultural similarities between India and Iran could outweigh Chinese economic prowess in getting closer. Iran would realise the same, however, historical unsure engagement prevents deeper ties. More engagement, trade and cultural exchanges could provide India with lien over Iran and counter Chinese influence. India could also view Iran as a diplomacy route to improving relations and working alongside China.

### **Strategic Options for India Over Iran.**

10. The closeness of US with Pakistan and India's closeness with Russia ensured luke warm relations with US since independence. However, there was little doubt over US importance towards meeting India's interests <sup>24</sup>. The turn in of new millennia ushered in a rejuvenated foreign policy for both nations where **US and India grew closer**<sup>25</sup>. Despite speculations over falling relations with Russia<sup>26</sup>, India has balanced its relation with both US and Russia very well. **India utilised advantages of a Non Aligned Policy and a strong economy where it was able to engage with both US and Russia even if there were opposing voices from both nations over India's stance.** Thus when India went super slow in engaging with Iran when US walked out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, it was

<sup>24</sup> "Why India Should Align with the US | ORF," accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/why-india-should-align-us-66233/>.

<sup>25</sup> "Is India Now Aligning with US Foreign Policy ? | We Are Change," accessed February 15, 2022, <https://wearechange.org/india-now-us-ally/>.

<sup>26</sup> "From Russia with Drift: Why the Delhi-Moscow Romance Is Now a Fading Diplomatic Relationship," accessed February 15, 2022, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/from-russia-with-drift-why-the-delhi-moscow-romance-is-now-a-fading-diplomatic-relationship/831646/>.

perhaps US pressure which dictated the same. India now awaits the outcome of ongoing talks between Iran and other western nations over re-instatement of JCPOA. The outcome of these talks would have a major bearing over the Indian foreign policy towards Iran, particularly when a particular stance has been taken.

**11. There is but little doubt that India has to engage with Iran now that China is already doing the same and if India doesn't counter the same, it could be detrimental to India's security interests.** China remained the largest exporter and importer of Iran importing approx USD 9 billion worth and exporting approx USD 10 billion worth. More trade means more interdependence and better relations. India is far behind with just USD 1 billion import from Iran and USD 2 billion of exports<sup>27</sup>. China is thus much ahead of India in this regard. However, Indian import and export to Iran has huge potential owing to the racial similarities. Iran imports raw material for its industry and India produces large quantities of the same. As far as India is concerned, Iran has oil which in itself a reason enough. Iran also requires to import food products and many other items of service industry. Iran could also be the gateway to Central Asian Republic Nations and earn substantial transit revenue by engaging with India. **India could engage more with Iran irrespective and without awaiting outcome of JCPOA deal.** In case the deal fails, India could still leverage managing Iran's policies by getting Iran to enter NPT or at least securing a bilateral agreement on nuclear aspects. A nuclear Iran shall not be in India's interests and to that regard JCPOA re-instatement would be directly beneficial for India but Iran has already taken a nuclear path. India would require being closer to Iran irrespective of the outcome of the deal.

**12. Iran being member of OPEC and OIC but opposed to many members of the same has to gain from India's clout in these countries and vice versa.** The population size of Sunni and Shia in India finds similarities to both the Arab world and Iran. A support from these nations assists India in countering Pakistan and ultimately foreign sponsored terrorism. Iran could also assist India in dealing with Afghanistan further promoting India's requirements. **Yet again India could also be a mitigating factor for Iran from its more palpable threat in form of Israel** which is increasingly engaging with Arab nations and at the same time displaying diplomatic and even physical hostility towards Iran.

**13. On the contrary, India could consider maintaining status quo and progress relations with Iran more or less based on US inputs.** After all, the oil imports to India continued even when Iran oil imports came to a

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<sup>27</sup> "Iran in 2021: The Economy | The Iran Primer," accessed February 16, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/index.php/blog/2021/dec/15/iran-2021-economy>.

standstill. Instead, imports increased from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and South American nations. US clout in these areas could have assisted India in meeting its energy requirements<sup>28</sup>. One could also argue that trade with CAR nations would take substantial time to develop owing to limited infrastructure and trade routes access available with CAR nations and they are already reasonably well dependent on China for sustaining their economies. India would require competing aggressively. The nations are also signatory to Collective Security Treaty Organisation and thus without Russian approval might hesitate in larger trade deals with India. It may be a better option for India to thus invest more with Russia rather than Iran. Russian oil route could be longer but would be more dependable and with Russian backing, be made more secure. Arab nations have a variety of issues of conflict. With dependence on oil slowly diminishing and fight to change monarchy governance sooner or later gaining prominence, Gulf might turn more violent. Iran is a limited big trading partner with very few imports / exports. Thus lesser relation with Iran is unlikely to hurt India economically. Most importantly, it would be difficult for India to trust or rather be dependent on Iran in times of crisis. Iran's support to Pakistan in wars must always be referred and in case of future conflicts with Pakistan or China religious and economic angles respectively have a higher probability to prevail over Iran's response.

### **ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN**

14. The finite borders of Afghanistan where it exists today was drawn only about 150 years ago. When the British historian diplomat Mount Stuart Elphinstone visited the country in 1809 he noted that the people did not call their own land Afghanistan<sup>29</sup>. Historically, Afghanistan was a part of Khorasan, an area which included today's Iranian area of Sistan, Pakistani area of Baluchistan, Indian area under Pakistani occupation and parts of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This area too was a desert albeit much harsher. With very less water, rocky and mountainous terrain and extreme climate, only the toughest survived. The word Afghan is said to be used in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Persia which means 'Noisy' in old Persian<sup>30</sup>. Khorasan was at the crossroad of the clash of civilization. The Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Persians, Indians and the Mongols all lead conquests in Khorasan. **From the time of Achaemenids Empire till Nadir Shah, 25 different dynasties ruled the area, none of which were originally from Khorasan<sup>31</sup>. More than 140 different rulers / chieftans governed the**

<sup>28</sup> "Iran Oil Imports: India Still Firm about Engaging with US, Avers South Block - ChiniMandi," accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.chinimandi.com/iran-oil-imports-india-still-firm-about-engaging-with-us-avers-south-block/>.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Tanner, "Afghanistan : A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban," 2002, 351.

<sup>30</sup> Tanner.

<sup>31</sup> "History of Afghanistan," accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.kohistani.com/afghanistan/history/>.

**area all for a few years. The area was thus never very stable historically and no external ruler invested much in Afghanistan, which primarily served as a transit route.** The foundations of modern day Afghanistan was laid by Ahmad Shah Durrani or Ahmad Shah Abdali in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and thereafter the region maintained its identity. The empire fragmented after Abdali but Dost Mohammad was the next ruler who united the Kingdom in 1826. During this period the country named Emirate of Afghanistan came into existence. **The period of Dost Mohammad coincided with the dramatic and meteoric rise of the British Empire and for the first time Afghanistan was sucked into the white man's world, something with which it suffers even today.** The power game between British and Russia led to Anglo Afghan war, which ultimately led to the boundaries of present day Afghanistan being drawn<sup>32</sup>. In 1893, the Durand line demarcated Afghanistan as separate area; a boundary still unacceptable to Afghanis. In 1919 Afghanistan was born as a separate nation. **The last king of Afghanistan was Mohammad Zahir Shah which in 1933 began a 40 year rule. During this period Afghanistan was able to sustain on its own and displayed a Soviet leaning but maintained a Non Aligned position. These 40 years display ability of Afghanis to sustain on their own and develop.** Zahir Shah also introduced the system of Constitutional Monarchy. Afghanistan was now beginning to face a democratic system and along with the positives, the negatives of democracy as well. The nuances of democracy, power game between US and USSR and misfortune of Afghanistan came together when soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 commencing a series of events which would transform the world order of peace and tranquility and plunge Afghanistan into darkness during a bright modern era. **It can be summarised that throughout history, Afghanistan has remained a feudal, tribal and an aggressive society dependent on raids, loot and violence rather than development.**

15. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was initially planned to be for a short duration, however, Soviets got sucked into the quagmire of a Proxy war with America via Afghanistan. The American and Pakistani tactics of indulging in war based on religious grounds through brainwashed, uneducated youth has changed the world forever. **Afghanistan was regrettably the battlefield.** The Soviets were intelligent enough to cut their losses and exit. But Afghanistan was now in a downward freefall. Fundamentalists took power; America got involved and as soon as America left the fundamentalist again came to power. The American – Pakistani tactics created war which is creating a religious divide throughout the world and **today the region is amongst the most unsafe places in the world**

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<sup>32</sup> "History of Afghanistan - Nations Online Project," accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/History/Afghanistan-history.htm>.

**where even proactive powers like China are reluctant to engage due to security concerns.**

16. **Barnett Rubin has described Afghanistan as a Rentier State** <sup>33</sup>. Various powers have paid Afghanistan for using their land, thus Afghans have remained a feudal state fragmented at lowest level. They have required big economic and military funding from external powers to consolidate. With very little natural / agricultural base to sustain the state system, lack of demonstration in developing the same, dependence on drug trade and an unsafe environment, **Afghanistan is unlikely to come out of the dark alley in short and middle future**. Afghanistan however has hope. The new technology brought in great estimates of minerals in the area estimate to a value in excess of USD 3 trillion<sup>34</sup> . To give a chance for it to be exploited, **Afghanistan requires to model itself into a more safe place, something which it hasn't done through the history.**

17. **India relation with Afghanistan has to be viewed from the perspective that Afghanistan was a part of India till 1919.** Traditionally, Afghans have been considered as honourable people who kept their word. Dealing with them was easy with diminished role of politics. Both the nations have displayed Soviet leaning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and substantial Indian diaspora existed in Afghanistan even during the time of Soviet presence. Afghani dry fruits and rugs are still very popular in India. The hardcore religious leaning of Afghanistan reduced the physical relation but closeness in heart remains. Afghanistan remains important for India for the following reasons:-

(a) **Geopolitical Location**. The location of Afghanistan which made it central to various invaders holds importance even today. Via Pakistan and Afghanistan is the shortest route to Central Asian Republics. The TAPI pipeline was conceived on the same premise and would have benefitted all parties, regrettably the unsafe transit route and disproportionate transit fee put the project into shelf. Today, Afghanistan is also important from the possibility of becoming China's stooge. Afghanistan is desperate for investment and is already working closely with China with a 30 year lease of a copper mine already provided. The present turmoil in Afghanistan has precluded China's aggressive mining but with stage already set, tomorrow China could get into Afghanistan in a big way. It would be detrimental to India's security interest. Most importantly, Afghanistan does provide

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<sup>33</sup> "Afghanistan as a Rentier State Model: Lessons from the Collapse," accessed February 17, 2022, <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-aug8-8.html>.

<sup>34</sup> "Natural Resources Of Afghanistan - WorldAtlas," accessed February 17, 2022, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-are-the-major-natural-resources-of-afghanistan.html>.

Pakistan strategic depth in case of an all out war with India. The Pakistani jihad factory has created and sustained the fundamentalists of Afghanistan and even today, maintain substantial lien over Taliban. These are aspects of concern to India.

(b) **Terrorism**. Even before Taliban took control of Afghanistan for the first time in 1996, Afghani mercenaries were being diverted to Kashmir by Pakistan. These foreign terrorists remained high on drugs and were ruthless. The Indian Army neutralised them, however lack of support from the local population was the key to them being unsuccessful in India. So far Taliban has abstained from Kashmir but have the potential to contribute ideologically and physically towards the Pakistani Kashmir cause. Though the Indian Army is well capable of dealing with them, it would require resources and funds to be diverted, which otherwise could have been gainfully utilised elsewhere. Afghanistan under Taliban and earlier have not accepted the Durand line and the area has remained volatile diverting Pakistani resources which has been in the Indian interest and India would like the situation to remain.

(c) **Stability of Afghanistan**. Whereas a busy Durand line would be in Indian interest, **perhaps the biggest worry of India would be a civil war in Afghanistan which spills into Pakistan**. The resulting refugee situation would be devastating for India. Having the history to refer and current situation to see, the world is unlikely to pump in billions required to keep Afghanistan functional. Post withdrawal, US is still spearheading the relief program, but over a passage of time the quantum of aid will reduce and unless Afghanistan changes its safety index, there is a very high probability of it collapsing. Today even the Europeans are turning away refugees owing to economic pressure' India would find it difficult to manage them.

### **Strategic Options for India**

18. The geo-political space in the region has to be managed and all developments have to be kept under a close watch. Towards the same Iran and Afghanistan offer similar opportunities. **However, Iran offers much higher returns both economically, diplomatically and militarily. India could thus focus on Iran and the Central Asian Republics**. This offers India opportunity to remain close to Russia and the US and at the same time check China's rise against India.

19. **Large scale investment in Afghanistan be viewed with a critical eye. There can be no guarantee for a stable long term return. At**

present Taliban is governing the country, there is definitely more peace seen by Afghanistan in decades but undoubtedly much more distress being witnessed by populace compared to previous years. **The ground situation might press upon India to engage with Taliban but recognising Taliban government would be detrimental towards India's stated stance. It can give rise to demands of legitimacy to various terrorist groups directly operational against Indian state.** Thus large scale investment like procuring and developing mining rights, military sales etc are neither recommended nor visualised presently. Moreover, the current lack of violence could very well be short lived. Unless Taliban invests in self development, rise of local population against Taliban is inevitable. External aid can assist to certain extent but a country can prosper only when it self-develops. Even the current Taliban militia will stand against rule beyond a particular time if subsistence means are unavailable for them and their families.

20. **Humanitarian aid at this juncture could bring the Afghanistan population even closer at heart to India and thus India must continue to provide such assistance based on India's economic capability and situational prudence.** During the US led NATO presence of 20 years in Afghanistan, India provided infrastructure and humanitarian aid worth about USD 3 billion to Afghanistan. The Indian aid was well calibrated and touched the very heart of a common Afghani. The Salma Dam and water supply schemes, Afghani Parliament, Indira Gandhi Children Hospital, Electric Supply to Kabul are projects which are well known and assisted the urban Afghani but hundreds of smaller, less visible and harder to trace projects, including community development ones like dozens of schools, basic health clinics, sports infrastructure, medical and educational facility in India etc ensured India was considered as a friend by all of Afghanistan<sup>35</sup>. The Indian say in Afghanistan has definitely diminished since the Taliban takeover particularly when Pakistan maintains substantial lien over Taliban, but, Pakistan is unlikely to maintain economic support to Taliban considering its own economical dependence on external aid. India would thus get an opportunity to re-engage in development effort of Afghanistan and continue with stalled projects like as the Shahtoot Dam and drinking water project for Kabul that would also facilitate irrigation; water supply for Charikar City; road connectivity to Band-e-Amir in Bamyán Province that would promote tourism; low cost housing for returning Afghan refugees in Nangarhar Province to assist in their resettlement; a gypsum board manufacturing plant in Kabul to promote value added local industry development and import substitution; a polyclinic in Mazar-e-Sharif among others. Previously committed resumption of additional 116 High Impact

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<sup>35</sup> "36 Things India Has Done for Afghanistan – The Diplomat," accessed February 17, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/36-things-india-has-done-for-afghanistan/>.



Community Development Projects in 34 provinces of Afghanistan. These projects will be in areas of education, health, agriculture, irrigation, drinking water, renewable energy, flood control, micro-hydro power, sports and administrative infrastructure. India also announced that on-going assistance programmes for education, capacity building, skills and human resource development of Afghanistan<sup>36</sup>.

21. India could also provide military assistance to stabilise Taliban regime or provide assistance to alliances working against Taliban. This, however, would largely depend on two broad conditions. **The first is whether India recognizes the new Kabul government; it would be an act of duplicity and extreme political risk to recognize it and also arm the opposition forces. The second is whether there will be any meaningful opposition to speak of in the first place.** The anti-Taliban front of 1996-2001 had something that the units currently gathered in the Panjshir Valley do not - a land link to Tajikistan, which allowed it to receive foreign assistance and to trade. Whether such an opposition force survives and regroups against the Taliban is independent of India at the moment. This has actually been India's dilemma with regard to Afghanistan ever since 2001. India could offer some aid, but aid needs stability and stability needed security. Afghanistan's security was a realm India could influence only in a limited proportion.

22. India should however exploit its credible soft power. Indian movies create a deep impact and are liked by the Afghanistan population. India is a lucrative destination for medical treatment and education. India can also assist Afghanistan towards modernisation through software development for government and private offices. The training of Afghanistan forces has continued even after Taliban came to power. Many of such aspects aren't as capital intensive as infrastructure development and direct aid as salaries to Afghani personnel's, but the soft power elements do have a deep impact. **India must engage with Afghanistan to keep a diplomatic line open.**

## CONCLUSION

23. Iran and Afghanistan **pose a dilemma for India** in the context of engagement. There is little doubt that there must be engagement with these two countries which are racially and historically linked to us but the **quantum of involvement** raises questions. The two countries also offer a paradox. These countries are in the situation they are in today due to US / UK policies of unabashedly promoting their cause. These western countries

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<sup>36</sup> "Indo-Afghan Relations : India-Afghanistan Relations," accessed February 17, 2022, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000>.

offer the least amount of trust particularly to any Asian country, however, the reality of their economic prosperity and ability to influence the world system cannot be doubted. India thus requires considering them while engaging with Iran and Afghanistan.

24. So far **India's response to Afghanistan may be considered as well calibrated, however, the interaction with Iran could have been warmer considering availability of oil with Iran** which India requires and Indian raw material & services industry which at times we find it difficult to export but required by Iran. Historically, Iran and India could be considered as two adjacent kingdoms with similar race but little in terms of cooperation. Furthermore, Iran has taken an anti-India stand more often than not in the post independence era. Thus India should avoid thinking too much in case news of Iran being irked with India's response post US walk out of JCPOA. Today Iran offers avenue to India of being a world balancing factor and thus India must take the opportunity. The trade with Iran would be easy and beneficial to both sides. Iran -India growth in trade is a win – win for both sides with probably a bigger win for India.

25. Afghanistan on the other hand is a calculated gamble. There is nothing India owes to Afghanistan, an area which though was a part of India, has mostly been involved in raiding mainland India. Involvement in Afghanistan regrettably is to be motivated by risk of failure rather than any successful cooperation leading to economic or military prosperity for India. A failed Afghanistan can cause more damage to Indian social and economic institutions than a non returning expenditure aimed to give Afghanistan a chance.

26. India probably has to do more in balancing relation with US and Russia along with China who competes and undermines Indian interests through all means which includes challenging its sovereignty. With US shifting focus from West Asia to secure its interests against China and Russia re-emerging as a competitive world super power, Iran and Afghanistan offer India an opportunity to increase its influence in the world stage and securing its interests. Indian response to Iran and Afghanistan has been well thought of and on the acceptable track. These countries can further India's cause in balance of equation with US and Russia and at the same time counter China's aggressive stance.

**CERTIFICATE**

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