



India-Iran Bilateral Relations: an Integrative Analysis of Mutual Antagonisms and Amicabilities

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Abstract:

The bilateral ties between India and Iran is unique and exclusive not only due to its close cultural and civilizational associations but also because of the intertwined network of its ancient and modern histories which have far reaching implications and reflections even in the contemporary Indian and Iranian economy, culture, society and politics. Indo-Iranian bilateral relations have generally been defined in terms of its cultural links and energy security ties. However, the relationship between the two countries moves beyond those conventional narrations and transcends into the new plots of terrorism, regional security, peace and stability. Hence it is important to analyse the relation between the two countries in a holistic manner where the security dimensions, political history, cultural links are intertwined in a complicated web of coherences and complementarities. This paper is an integrative analysis of the major ebbs and flows in the bilateral relation between India and Iran and its implications at a regional level.

Keywords: *Bilateral Relations, India, Iran, Regional Implications*

1. Introduction

India and Iran have been interacting with each other as two neighboring civilizations since pre-historic times. The advent of British colonialism in the subcontinent has weakened the relationship between the two countries. However, both the countries had revived their bilateral ties after the independence of India in 1947. The bilateral relations between the two countries again got weakened during the cold war period despite their close civilizational affinities (Pant 2004). The emergence of bipolar structure in the international system has become the major stumbling block in the bilateral ties between the two countries. The threat of Soviet Union to the region of Middle East had forced Iran to Join the Western Capitalist Bloc led by USA while India had pursued its Non-Alignment policy without taking any part in the cold war (Naaz, 2001). The support given by Nehru to Nasser of Egypt as the leader of the Arab world has worsened Tehran's attitude towards India in 1950s. This has provoked Shah to support the formation of an Islamic Bloc which again led to Tehran's close association with Pakistan (Mudiam, 1979). Iran's growing amicable relationship with Pakistan had created many apprehensions in India. During those times, the bilateral relations between India and Iran were more constrained to economic and trade co-operation (Pant, 2004).

India's relation with Iran has remained fragile in late 1970s and 1980s. The age old Indo-Iranian friendship was again under the scanner due to Iran's moral and material support to Pakistan in Indo-Pakistan war of 1965. Even after the war, Iran continued giving its support to Pakistan (Choudhary, 1974). India's support to Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the political uncertainties in Iran due to 1979 revolution were the watershed events in India-Iran bilateral relations. However, there were no improvements in the bilateral ties. Rather, Iran's stand on Kashmir issue became more harsh and rigid.

Pant was of the opinion that “India’s ambiguous stake on Iraq’s intervention in Kuwait in 1990 and the further developments in the Gulf war had widened the relationship between the two countries” (Pant 2004). The bilateral relation between India and Iran took a new turn in mid 1990s under the new leadership of Hashemi Rafsanjani due to several factors such as collapse of the Soviet Union, Isolation of Iraq after the Gulf war, growing terrorist threats and the rise of Taliban. However, the relations between both the countries were clouded by the influence of Organization of Islamic Nations (OIC) and Pakistan (EPW, 2001).

A major turning point in India-Iran bilateral relationship came into being when then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao made an official visit to Iran in 1993. He was the first Indian Prime Minister who visited Iran ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In return to this, the Iranian President, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani made an official visit to India in 1995. Since then, there were many high level bilateral exchanges between the two countries. This further leads to the revival of political contacts and the consolidation of bilateral ties between India and Iran. It was in this context that President Khatami came to India in 2003 as a part of the official visit which had implications not only on the bilateral relations but also on regional peace and stability. The bilateral relations between India and Iran in the post-cold war period was shaped by the dominance of USA and the emergence of a unipolar structure in the international system, India’s need to counter Pakistan and its influence in Islamic world, the growing strategic importance of Central Asian States and the need to embolden the economic ties with Iran (Pant 2004). In 2006, India had voted to send its nuclear dossier to the UN Security Council which resented Iran. At present, Iran is completely critical of Pakistan as the Iranian authorities accused Pakistan for supporting ISI for helping the Baloch Separatist Movement and its leader Abdulmalik Rigi. There is a political and economic rapprochement between India and Iran especially after the election of the reformist leader Khatami (The India Express, 2016). Thus the history of the bilateral relations between India and Iran is the history of ebbs and flows where one could see the combination of both amicable and antagonisms on several grounds between the two countries.

2. Political and Diplomatic Relations: Commonalities and Differences

The political relation between India and Iran has been in constant fluctuation where many ups and downs occurred due to many external factors as well as domestic factors. During the cold war period, the bilateral relations between India and Iran got deteriorated. During cold war period, Iran made an alliance with USA and India pursued a Non-Alignment Policy without joining any of those two rival blocks. Another difference was surfaced in their bilateral relations when India supported the presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan while Iran chose to stay from it. India never hesitated to express her resentment against the nuclear programme of Iran. Despite the friendly relations with Iran, India in 2005 voted against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency. However, after the 1979 revolution in Iran, the diplomatic relations between India and Iran improved instantly. There was an amicable relation between India and Iran in seventies (Ali, 1975).

But again, during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). the bilateral ties again got weakened due to India’s support for Iraq. The relation between India and Iran become highly tensed when Iran detained India’s ‘MT Dese Shanti’, the vessel carrying crude oil from Iran. Iran’s constant support to Pakistan irritated India at a political level. However, there are many instances where Iran objected Pakistan’s anti-India resolutions at international platforms such as Human Rights Commission and Organization of Islamic Co-operation. India and Iran also together to support the Northern alliance fight against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. They both supported the anti-Taliban government led by Ashraf Ghani who was supported by USA. India also supported the Inclusion of Iran as an observer State in the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation. Harshe argued that Globalization has made Iran an important political partner for India (Harshe, 1997).

Iran's friendly approach to India became again conspicuous when it supported India's right to be a part of the Afghan Peace Process. Iran has tremendously supported the Indo-Pak dialogue to find out a solution to the Kashmir issue which marked the change of Iran's attitude towards India. India and Iran came into a common platform to criticize the excessive involvement of USA in South and South-West Asia (Harshe, 1997). When Iran was the head of the Organization of Islamic Countries, it took a neutral stance on Kashmir. Iran also condemned terrorism and the religious fundamentalism of the Taliban in a joint statements made by the two countries. In another joint declaration, India and Iran condemned the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban forces. Iran was upset by the Pakistan's support to Taliban (EPW, 2001).

3. Cultural Links

India has strong cultural links with Iran from the pre-modern times. There is an ancient civilizational link between two countries (EPW, 2001). The religious and cultural links between the two countries are too strong. The clerical government in Iran perceive themselves as the world leader of Shiites across the world including those within India. Indian Shiites celebrate Muharram which is declared by the Indian government as a national holiday. Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh in India continued to be the major Shiite cultural centre. The Persian studies are very popular in the 'City of Nawabs'. India has world's largest Parsi community in the world. They are otherwise known as Zoroastrians. These Parsi communities have made significant contributions in the field of Industry, Politics, Science, Cinema and culture. Dadabhai Naoroji, JRD Tata, Homi Bhabha, Sam Manekshaw, Freddie Mercury, Zubin Mehta are some of the prominent figures from Parsi community who had made significant contributions in various fields in India. The shared cultural and civilizational affinities between India and Iran have impacted each other's values, traditions, language and cuisine (Jorfi, 1994).

The cultural link between India and Iran can be traced back to pre-history. The Persian influence in India has been brought by the Muslim rulers with Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rulers coming into power in India. The influence of Persian culture could be seen in the language, art and architecture in India. The official language of Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire was Persian. Persian was the lingua franca of the Mughal Empire under Akbar. Later on, Persian became the dominant language among the Elite Muslims especially in North India. The development and evolution of Urdu language was deeply influenced by Persian. Even in modern times, the Persian language has remained a relevant one. Many Indian students find interest in learning Persian and they even pursue their academic career in learning and developing an expertise in Persian language. There are many Persian language centres across India. The Iran Culture House located in New Delhi sought to promote the cultural links between India and Iran. The association between SAADI Foundation in Iran with the Iran culture House primarily aims to enrich the cultural link between the two countries. Iranian government has provided many opportunities for the Indian students to visit the country and learn Persian there. Long term and short term country visits are also organized by the Iranian government for the Indian students.

The educational ties between the two countries have been reflected in the growing number of inflow of Iranian students into the Indian Universities especially in Pune and Bangalore. Their numbers are significantly large in the most of the Central Universities in India. There are vibrant student exchange programmes between universities in India and Iran. Huge numbers of Memorandum of Understanding have been signed between the universities in two countries. The food festivals conducted by the Iranian students in Indian universities represent the harmony existing between the Indian and Iranian students in those Universities. The annual food festival conducted by the International students including the Iranian students in the Jawaharlal Nehru University attract many Indian students and the festival become a huge celebration which is a manifestation of the peaceful cultural and diplomatic ties between India and Iran. Many scholarships are provided to Iranian students under many institutes (Ex.

ICSSR). plans and schemes (Ex. Colombo Plan). In Iran, the institutes like kendriya Vidyalaya Tehran and the Embassy of India School serves the Indian students living in Tehran.

4. Economic Co-operation

The economic relations between India and Iran have been so strong and mutually beneficial for one another. Iran is the second largest crude oil supplier to India and India has remained one of the biggest foreign investor in Iran's oil and gas industry. The significant economic ties between the two countries could be seen in the statistics of huge crude oil imports to India and diesel exports from India to Iran. Harshe is of the opinion that Iran is now important for India in the context of the emergence of globalization phenomenon (Harshe, 1997). Both the countries had initiated many joint ventures in the fields of environment, auto-mobile industry, agriculture, textiles, tourism, oil exploration, Pharmaceuticals etc. Rajan Harshe was of the opinion that both the countries have to concretely work out on these areas and need to materialist their initiatives on various fields for the common good (Harshe, 1997). Khajehpur is also of the opinion that apart from energy co-operation, both India and Iran complement to each other in the fields of information technology, agriculture and petrochemicals (Khajehpour, 2001).

The new thrust in the bilateral relation between India and Iran in mid-1990s could be seen more in the economic field rather than in the political arenas. There were many trade delegation exchanges between both the countries in 1996. In the year 1997, a transit trade agreement was signed among India, Iran and Turkmenistan. The agreement was signed mainly to use the Caspian Sea as a trade corridor. The bilateral trade between both the countries continued to grow over the years. However, some of the proposals made between two countries still remained unfulfilled. For example, the proposal of North-South Corridor connecting India, Iran and Russia has still remained a dream project (EPW, 2001). The energy ties lies at the heart of the long term bilateral relationship between India and Iran. The building up a gas pipeline between India and Iran assumed great significance in the energy co-operation between both the countries (Pant, 2006).

The development of infrastructure projects indicates the strong investment co-operation between India and Iran. India gave the financial support to Iran to build up the highway between Zaranj and Delaram Highway. The construction and development of the Chabahar Port was jointly financed by India and Iran. An agreement was signed between India, Iran and Afghanistan by which a preferential treatment and tariff reductions are given to the Indian goods at Chabahar port. India had given aid to Iran to upgrade the Chabahar-Milak road. Harshe is of the opinion that India has to strengthen its bilateral ties with Iran especially in the context of emerging markets and the growing significance of Central Asian States. India could use the Iranian territory to trade its goods with the Central Asian States. Apart from transit facilities, the friendly relation with Iran could bolster India's energy security also. Hence Iran is an important country for India to fulfill its economic and commercial interests apart from the political interests (Harshe, 1997). Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's recent official visit to Iran on 22 May 2016, marked the improving economic ties between two countries. During his official visit to Iran, the representatives of the two countries majorly focused on infrastructure projects, energy partnerships, trade and bilateral connectivity between the two countries. Singh state that Iran has around fifteen percent of world's gas reserves. The India-Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project would beneficial for both India and Pakistan as both countries need long term energy supplies. India would get access to large markets too (Singh, 2008).

5. Strategic Alliance and the Regional Implications

India and Iran share some common strategic interests. The major tension areas between India and Iran were the close ties of Iran with Pakistan. Iran's support to Pakistan in India-Pakistan disputes, its condemnation of India's aggression against Pakistan, Material aid of Iran to Islamabad in the 1965 war, Shah's support to Kashmiris' self-determination and his endorsement of Pakistan in Kashmir

issue, Tehran's support to India-Pakistan war in 1971 evoked huge resentment in India. Iran's link with CENTO also created apprehensions in India. India's Non-alignment policy was a counter narrative and alternative to cold war tensions which stood against the alliances such as SEATO and CENTO. India was very much concerned about the possibility of the arms diversion from CENTO to Pakistan with the support of Iran (Ali, 1975).

India and Iran had signed an Indo-Iranian strategic agreement by which Iran could access to the military expertise of India. A defense co-operation agreement was signed between the two countries in December 2002. The bilateral ties between India and Iran have a huge potential to influence the regional dynamics of Middle East and South West Asia which could be a counter to the growing US interests in those areas (RAND, 2003). The recent visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's to Iran and the subsequent signing of the strategic Chabahar port deal is a major stride towards the friendly relationship between the two countries. This deal would help India to build a close ties with Iran and other Central Asian countries. This would help to compete with the increasing influence of China in the region. This has wider implications in the region in general. It goes beyond the conventional notion of perceiving Iran as a prime energy supplier to India (The Indian Express, 2016). India has started seeing Iran as a potential regional player in Central Asia and Near East which has been manifested in the potentialities of the recent Chabahar port deal. The words of the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stand as testimony to it. He stated that "the deal is not only economic but also more political and regional. The deteriorating relationship between Iran and Pakistan and Iran's interests in India as a potential regional player have wide connotations as far as the co-operation and security are concerned in the region. Recently, the Islamic Republic of Iran has given the full support to India to fight Al Qaeda and any other forms of Islamic fundamentalism (The Indian Express, 2016). This indicates that the ties between India and Iran can counter the terrorism in the region through their combined initiatives and efforts.

6. Conclusion

The commonalities existing between India and Iran are immense which has its deep roots in the shared cultural connections and the civilizational linkages. The major peculiarity of the India-Iran relation is the constant ebbs and flows which surface often between the two countries due to changing national and international environment and other power dynamics. Another peculiarity of the bilateral ties between the two countries is the fact that there has been a constant and stable amicable economic co-operation between the two countries even if there is an antagonism exists between the two countries. The cultural and economic connections between the two remain more stable and solid as compared to their association at a political and strategic level. The third party entry into their bilateral ties remains a major irritant in the friendly relation between India and Iran. Even if there were certain political and strategic tensions between the two countries due to several external factors, there relationship remains unbreakable even today. The increasing diplomatic ties between the two countries as a recent development stand as a testimony to it. The role of India and Iran as two major potential powers has many implications in the region at first place. The co-operation between the two would be beneficial for both the countries. It has also certain positive impacts on the region as a whole. The growing amicable relation between the two countries can bring more peace, stability, development and prosperity into the region. Hence it is highly important to nourish a stable and friendly relationship between both the countries for their overall development at the domestic front as well as at a regional level.

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