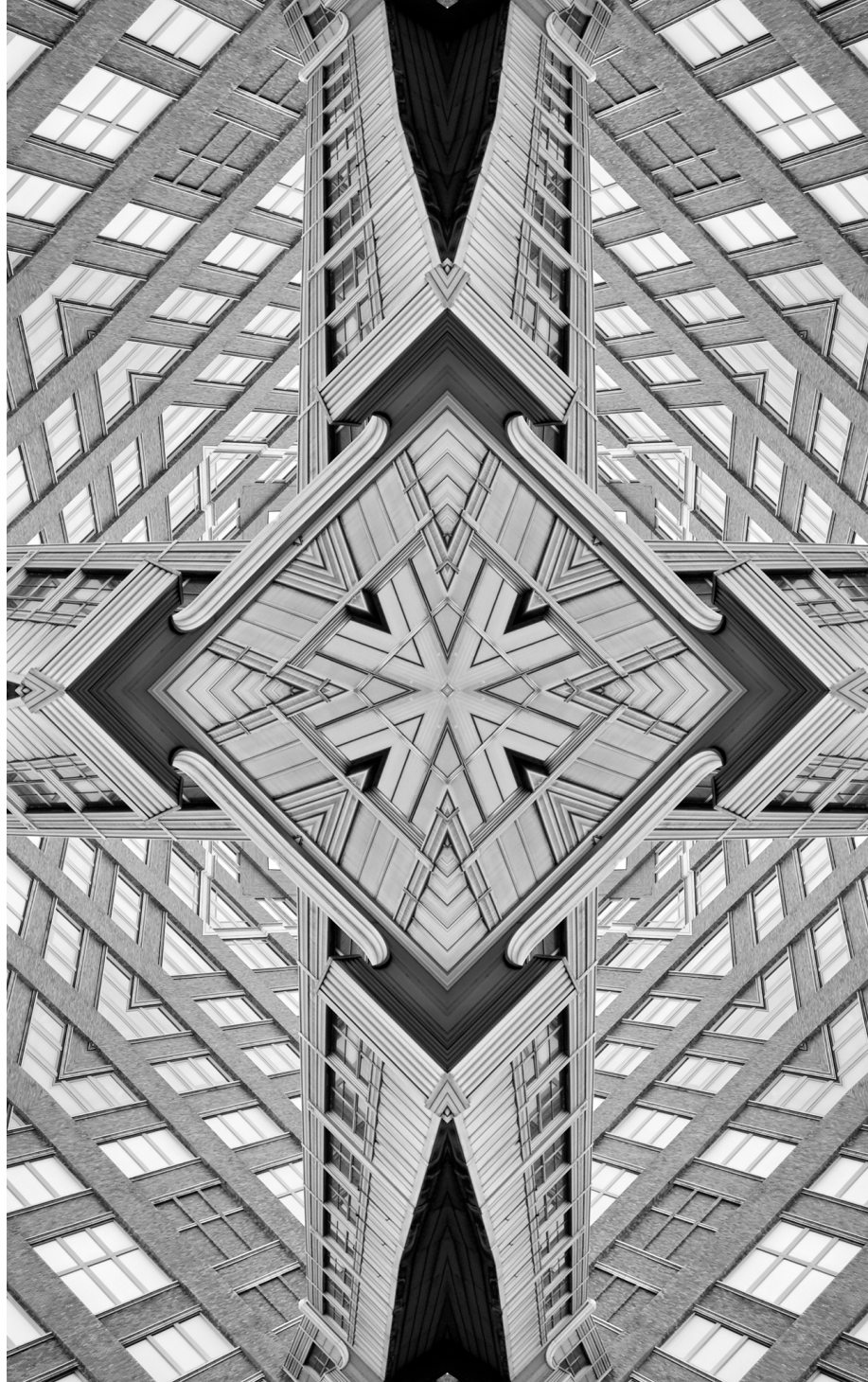


Issue

Brief

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The Role of Iran in India's Strategic Outreach in West Asia

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Abstract

India's relations with West Asia is among the country's successes in foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. One country conspicuous in its sub-par engagement with India, however, is Iran. This brief makes a case for a reset in Iran-India relations under Iran's newly elected president and PM Modi's third term. It examines the options and opportunities available to the two countries, and explores the recent changes in the region that are influencing India's engagement with Iran. As India looks to further consolidate its outreach and strategic convergence in West Asia, Iran remains an important vector.

Iran's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, was sworn in on 30 July 2024 after beating Saeed Jalili¹ through a runoff in the election on 5 July. It brings an end to a turbulent period in Iran following the death of former President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash in May, and the country can now focus on pressing issues at home and abroad. Within the region, the ongoing war in Gaza will remain a point of focus for Iran, as it threatens to expand eastwards into Lebanon. The chances of conflict escalation, given Iran's support of Hezbollah, cannot be ruled out. At the same time, Iran will have to build upon the gains of the recent past, especially of 2023, which was a fruitful year in its regional diplomacy.

The upcoming presidential elections in the United States (US) too, hold a significance for Iran. A return of Donald Trump could well see a resumption of hostility towards Iran, which was evident in Trump's first term, when the US unilaterally revoked the Iran nuclear deal—the 2018 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed between Iran and several leading world powers to ensure Iran's nuclear programme remained exclusively for peaceful purposes. There were also the Abraham Accords signed during Trump's term,^a which aimed at formalising Israel's engagement with the Arab world. These singled out Shia-dominated Iran as the biggest enemy of the Sunni-majority Arab states in the region. However, following Trump's presidency, there have been certain other developments in the region which have been favourable for Iran.

Chief among them was the China-brokered Saudi Arabia-Iran peace deal announced in March 2023, and the inclusion of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)^b and in BRICS.^c While the peace deal prompted a wave of reconciliation that increased Iran's acceptability in the region, the outbreak of war in Gaza in October 2023 brought to the fore Iran's military muscle and intent which was executed initially by strikes on Israel by its proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah. Later, Iran too, gave a display of its military capability by targeting Israel directly for the first time, in April 2024. All this has given Iran a pole position in a regional conflict where many others watched from the sidelines.

a The Abraham Accords were signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and between Israel and Bahrain, both in September 2020, normalising relations between these historically antagonistic states. Both the UAE and Bahrain thereby recognised Israel's sovereignty and established diplomatic relations with it. Subsequently, Israel also signed similar accords with Morocco in December 2020 and Sudan in January 2021.

b The SCO is a global economic and political organisation set up by China and Russia in 2001.

c BRICS stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. This economic grouping was expanded on 1 January 2024 to include Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, and the UAE.

Buoyed by these developments, Iran is looking to increase its clout in the region. Even before the peace deal with Saudi Arabia, then President Raisi had announced a ‘neighbourly policy’ (*siyasat-e-hamsayegi*) soon after taking over in August 2021, which focused on improving relations with Iran’s Arab neighbours, especially Saudi Arabia. The ‘Look East’ component of this policy aimed at finding partners beyond its immediate neighbourhood. It is thus that Iran has successfully forged strategic partnerships with Russia and China. Another country to Iran’s east, which could be a trustworthy partner, is India.

For India, Iran has always been important. The two nations have a shared civilisational history. The Persian and Sanskrit languages have much in common. Ancient history reveals that both Iranians and Indians originated from the same group of humans who lived in the fertile pasture lands of Central Asia centuries ago. From a common home, Aryan migration towards India began around 6,000 BCE.

In modern times, Iran has been an important nation in India’s neighbourhood with which it shared a border till Partition and Independence in 1947. Soon after Independence, India and Iran signed a friendship treaty on 15 March 1950.² More recently, the Tehran Declaration³ was signed during the visit of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Iran in April 2001, and was soon followed by the New Delhi Declaration⁴ signed when Iran’s President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami visited India in January 2003.

The bilateral ties, however, could not maintain momentum mainly due to Western sanctions on Iran over its controversial nuclear programme. The sanctions placed severe global restrictions on trade with Iran as well as the import of its crude oil and natural gas. Except for a brief period between January 2016 and May 2018, when some of the sanctions were eased after the Iran nuclear deal was signed in July 2015, they have continued indefinitely since December 2006 when the sanctions were imposed on Iran via United Nations Security Council Resolution 1737 for failing to stop its uranium enrichment programme.⁵

Despite the constraints, PM Modi visited Iran in May 2016 and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani reciprocated in February 2018.⁶ A number of agreements were signed during both visits, focused on trade, connectivity and transit to Central Asia and Afghanistan. It was during this period that the work on Chabahar port

in Iran,^d in which India played a leading role, also picked up pace; on 13 May this year, India and Iran signed the 10-year contract for the port's operation.⁷ Under the agreement, India will further develop the Chabahar port for the next 10 years and use its facilities as well for its own exports. India's Ports, Shipping, and Waterways Minister Sarbananda Sonowal has declared the agreement as historic,⁸ heralding a new age of trade, marine cooperation, and transshipment, while boosting trilateral trade between India, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Chabahar also has the potential of becoming a crucial link in the International North South Corridor (INSTC).^e The INSTC, initiated by India, Iran, and Russia in September 2000, was aimed to boost connectivity with landlocked Central Asian Republics. Later, 11 more countries joined.^f The current route facilitates movement of cargo from Mumbai (India) to Bandar Abbas (Iran) by sea, from Bandar Abbas to Bandar-e Anzali by road, from Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan, a Caspian Port in Russia, by ship, and from Astrakhan to other parts of the Russian Federation and farther into Europe by Russian railways.

The INSTC was operationalised in June 2022⁹ when the first cargo left Russia's Caspian Sea port zone of Solyanka in Astrakhan, and reached Nhava Sheva in Navi Mumbai (also known as Jawaharlal Nehru Port), India's largest container port. With its operationalisation and India's foothold at Chabahar port, further linking of an arm of the INSTC to Chabahar could prove beneficial to India in its quest to have multiple connectivity routes across the region—all the way to Europe.¹⁰

d Chabahar comprises two ports – Shahid Kalantari Port and Shahid Behesti port. India has helped in the development of Shahid Behesti port, and in return has been given exclusive rights to use some of its terminals for trade with Central Asia.

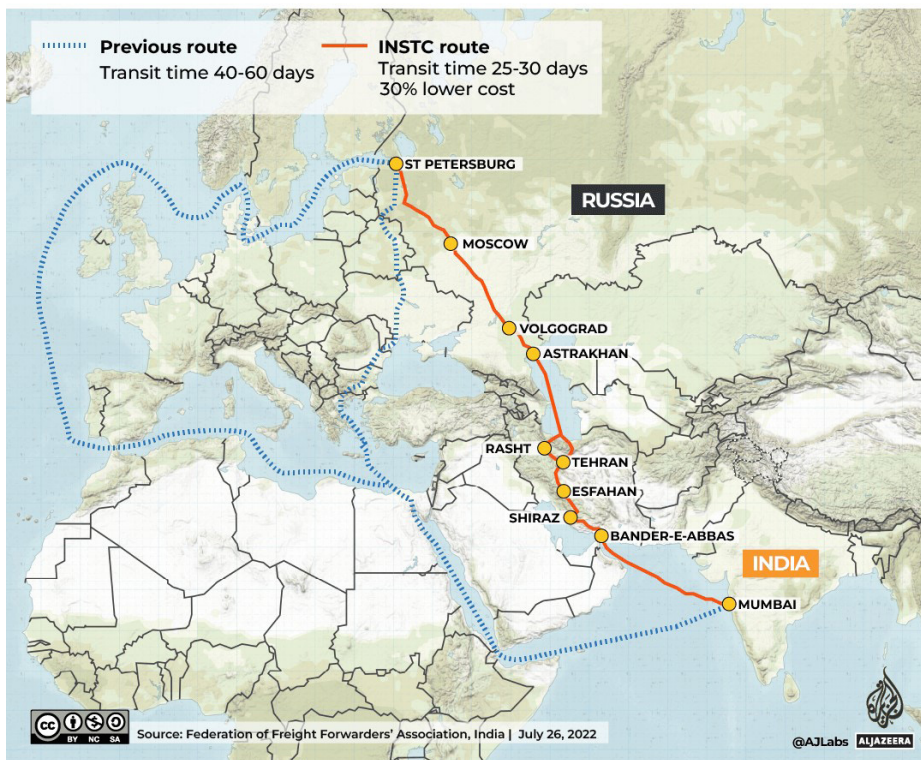
e The INSTC is a multi-mode network of ship, rail and road to move freight between India, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia, along with other Central Asian countries.

f These were Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Oman, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Ukraine.

INDIA

International North-South Transport Corridor

The INSTC could offer Russia an economic escape route to Asia at a time when sanctions are limiting its transit access through most of Europe.



Source: Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/7/27/russias-new-economic-escape-route>

The Importance of Iran

Iran's importance for India goes well beyond the Chabahar port and the connectivity which it provides to Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics (since the shorter land route through Pakistan is closed to India). Iran matters owing to its location, size, history, and role in the region. Along with Iraq, it geographically covers almost the entire northern coast of the Persian Gulf, provides critical links towards the Levant, Central Asia, and South Asia, and is a huge reservoir of natural resources. Geopolitically, Iran with its civilisational history, political evolution over centuries, and economic and military strength, is a power in the region. Its ability to control and choke movement of ships across the narrow Strait of Hormuz has economic and geopolitical implications, not only for the region but globally, as it can disrupt critical energy supplies.¹¹

As the ongoing Gaza war has shown, Iran is by far the most powerful military nation in the region, both in capability and intent. According to the Global Fire-Power Report of 2024¹² which ranks 145 countries militarily, Iran is 14th—ahead of Israel at 17th. Within the region, Iran ranks second, just behind Turkey. What most reports miss, however, is that Iran has military power beyond what official figures reveal, often disguised as equipment and personnel distributed among its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or other non-state actors and allies. The 'Military Balance 2024' report¹³ notes that in 2023, Iran's defence spending reached an estimated IRR (Iranian Rial) 3.194 trillion (approx. US\$43.8 billion), making it the region's second highest spender on military, behind only Saudi Arabia which has a budget of US\$69.1 billion.

Iran has also developed, over the past three decades, an intricate network of militias and proxies in the region that have been fighting its battles. The famous 'Three Hs'—i.e., Hamas (in the Gaza strip), Hezbollah (in Lebanon), and the Houthis (in Yemen)—are prominent, along with several other smaller yet effective groups. It has trained and equipped them with lethal weapons systems including armed drones and short- and medium-range missiles. These militias are also closely embedded within the local population across the Levant, making it easier for them to operate.

Iran's nuclear programme, which has been a bone of contention with the West and brought it severe economic sanctions, is yet another powerful expression of Iran in the region. Though Iran did make some concessions in the JCOPA in return for reduced sanctions, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report of February 2024¹⁴ shows that it continues to enrich uranium to very high

The Importance of Iran

grades of purity and that its total enriched uranium stockpile is 5,525 kg. The report added that Iran now had an estimated 121.5 kg of uranium enriched with up to 60 percent purity. By the IAEA's own theoretical definition, around 42 kg of uranium enriched to 60 percent is the minimum needed to make a nuclear bomb;¹⁵ Iran thus has the capacity to make three such bombs.

Iran's energy reserves—crude oil and natural gas—are its main sources of economic strength. It has the world's third largest oil and second largest natural gas reserves, according to the US State Department of Energy.¹⁶ The total oil reserves of Iran¹⁷ were estimated at 209 billion barrels; of natural gas, 33,988 billion cubic metres. At the end of 2021, Iran accounted for 24 percent of the oil reserves of West Asia, and 12 percent of the world's.¹⁸ Iran was the fifth largest crude oil producer among the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 2021, and the world's third largest natural gas producer in 2020.

Despite crippling economic sanctions and the ongoing war in Gaza, Iran's crude production in May 2024 rose by more than 20 percent over the past two years¹⁹ to 3.4 million barrels per day (bpd), which is 3.3 percent of the total global oil supply. Iran's crude exports in March 2024 averaged 1.61 million bpd,²⁰ the highest since May 2023 when they stood at 1.68 million bpd, which in turn was the highest since 2018. Iranian crude and condensate exports had reached 2.8 million bpd in May 2018 before the re-imposed US-led economic sanctions came into effect.

Iran is the world's leading Shia Muslim nation, with its ideological, political and military influence extending across the Levant, as well as to Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Caucasus region, right up to Afghanistan. India too, has a sizeable Shia Muslim population which looks up to Iran.

Past Roadblocks

India-Iran relations have not lived up to their potential, mostly due to factors beyond bilateral issues. The reasons include India's stopping of oil imports from Iran after May 2019 following the resumption of US sanctions after it revoked the Iran nuclear deal, its close relations with Israel, as well as Iran's expanding ties with China, especially after the signing of their 25-year strategic partnership agreement in March 2021.²¹

Others include Iran's involvement in the civil war in Yemen, where India remains strictly neutral, while Iran has backed the Houthi rebels, who launched drone attacks against India's allies like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2019. In August 2019, Iran issued a statement²² criticising the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status by India. Iran has also not taken kindly to India succumbing to pressure from the West to impose sanctions on it.

In the last few years, there have been changes that could improve India-Iran ties. The Saudi-Iran peace deal, which has led to the two big rivals of the region reconciling, has changed the dynamics of West Asia. It also makes it easier for India to engage with Iran (though India never considered ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran as a zero-sum game). Talks on modifying Iran's nuclear programme are stalled, which means there is going to be no deal in the horizon and thus no easing of Western sanctions. This, though, makes decision-making in India vis-à-vis Iran simpler; there are no changes likely in the West's stance. India is free to engage with Iran to the extent it can balance its global interests.

The inclusion of Iran in the SCO and BRICS in 2023 could not have happened without India's support. The Gaza war, which in turn sparked the brief Iran-Israel military spat of April 2024 when both countries conducted direct military strikes on each other's territory, signifies that Iran may be shedding its traditional strategic patience—²³ a significant development.

There is also the close bond developing between Iran and Qatar. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed a land, sea and air blockade on it, accusing it of supporting terrorism and extremism, eventually even getting Qatar expelled from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in June 2017. Iran seized the opportunity to extend immediate help to Qatar, supplying essential commodities such as food and medicines, exporting over 1,100 tons of food daily to it in the initial blockade days and allowing Qatar to use its airspace. Though Qatar was reinstated in the GCC after three and a half years, and has been attending GCC summits from 2021, Iran has since become a key ally. Qatar has also emerged as an important player in efforts to end the ongoing Gaza war, as Hamas still has its headquarters in Doha; Saudi Arabia and the UAE, meanwhile, have maintained a rather ambivalent position. Along with Iran, it is mainly Qatar and Turkey which have stood up to Western and Israeli pressures in the war.²⁴

With former President Riasi's 'neighbourly policy'²⁵ and the China-brokered peace deal with Saudi Arabia in place, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE now have full diplomatic relations with Tehran. In May 2024, Iran and the UAE also held the first session of their Joint Economic Committee²⁶ meeting in Abu Dhabi, aiming to boost economic cooperation further. Iran-Egypt ties, disrupted for decades following Egypt's close links with the West, are also on the mend. In May 2024, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian met his

Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry²⁷ on the sidelines of the 15th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Banjul to discuss improving bilateral ties. In the same month, Shoukry visited Tehran to attend Raisi's funeral, thus becoming the first Egyptian foreign minister to set foot there since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

With Turkey, Iran has had a troubled relationship, especially over them backing rival groups in Syria. The war in Gaza, however, has been a rallying point, with Raisi visiting Ankara in January 2024 to meet Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan²⁸ to improve relations and forge a common policy on Gaza. So too, was Syria readmitted into the Arab League in May 2023,²⁹ 12 years after its membership had been revoked after the country plunged into civil war following the 'Arab Spring' protests of March 2011. This further strengthens Iran's position as Syria is its key ally.

Other developments have helped Iran emerge stronger in the region. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 had Iran taking advantage of it to engage with the Taliban. The completion of the INSTC after years of delay makes Iran an important hub for cross-continental trade, especially for Russia and Central Asia. Iran's ability to manufacture lethal and long-range armed drones, and export them to its proxies in the region as well as Russia has strengthened its military muscle. Iran is now among the top mass manufacturers of armed drones in the region.³⁰ All these have also altered how the West Asian region sees Iran.

India's relationship with West Asia has also been transformed in the past decade. PM Modi has continued his outreach towards West Asia which began with his visit to the UAE in August 2015.^g There has been an unprecedented boost in political and economic engagement with the region, going well beyond the traditional buyer-seller relationship, with India mainly focused on energy imports. Even so, Iran is one nation West Asian nation where India's outreach has not yet translated into a more concrete partnership.

Still, leaders from both countries have been interacting at a number of forums in the past few years. The Chabahar port deal, and the possibility of India recommencing oil imports from Iran, along with many other engagement options, could well lead to an enhanced engagement.

^g He was the first Indian prime minister to do so in more than three decades.

Both Iran and India have demonstrated that their policies are governed solely by their national interests. Mutual recognition that bilateral ties can be governed by this principle should open doors for greater cooperation. It does not matter whether the incumbent Iranian president is a ‘reformist’ or a ‘hardliner’—Rouhani was labelled the first, and Raisi the latter, but relations with India under both remained at par. While Rouhani and Modi exchanged visits in 2016 and 2018, respectively, and signed multiple agreements, Raisi and Modi have also had fruitful exchanges on the sidelines of multilateral forums.

Indeed, the Chabahar deal was signed days before Raisi’s helicopter crash. In his “message to the new world” as he called it, on 12 July 2024,³¹ Pezeshkian, at the time still ‘president-elect’, stated that he supports a “balanced foreign policy” which preserves Iranian and Persian pride, while negotiating with the world on the basis of “dignity, wisdom and expediency”. Though India was not mentioned in the address, it is expected that he will further improve India-Iran ties.

In any renewed engagement between the two countries, energy supplies will matter the most. Before May 2019, Iran was supplying almost 10 percent of India’s oil needs. If India re-commences imports from Iran, it could open up a whole new basket of possibilities to fulfil its energy needs. Iran, which presently supplies to China too, will get a large market in return. At least in the foreseeable future, India remains dependent on fossil fuels for its energy security, and thus a diversified portfolio is in India’s interest. The possibilities are many: so far, only the UAE has offered to store strategic oil reserves in India. India may well approach Iran to do the same.

The ambitious Iran-Oman-India gas pipeline has been discussed since 1993, but little has come of it. On 23 May 2022, however, during then President Raisi’s visit to Oman,³² the two countries agreed to develop two undersea gas pipelines and an oil field along their maritime borders. If this fructifies, extending it to India becomes a possibility, which would make up for the failed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline^h and facilitate uninterrupted supply of natural gas to India. At present, Qatar is India’s largest natural gas supplier, with significant quantities

^h The pipeline was first mooted between Iran and Pakistan in 1995, but in 1999 India was invited to be part of it as well. But as relations with Pakistan deteriorated, and the pipeline made hardly any progress, India withdrew from it in 2009.

also coming from Abu Dhabi in the UAE.^{1,33,34} If Iran too, starts supplies, it would boost India's energy security.

As the INSTC progresses, it will have benefits for both India and Iran. There are proposals to link it to Chabahar port as it is envisaged as a crucial link in the eastern route of the INSTC corridor, facilitating the movement of goods between India and Central Asian countries. With its geographical advantage of being located outside the Strait of Hormuz, Chabahar port will also insulate India's trade to a great extent from any threat of closure of sea lanes due to conflicts in the Persian Gulf region. A railway link of 700 km between Chabahar and Zahedan city³⁵ is also being fast-tracked, which will later be connected to the existing railway network of Iran. Once it is developed, the link to Zahedan, and onwards to Zaranj in Afghanistan, will provide seamless connectivity for humanitarian aid from India to Afghanistan through Chabahar.

Close military cooperation with Iran will also help India. The two countries had signed a defence cooperation agreement in 2001 but nothing came of it, mainly due to the sanctions on Iran. Since the sanctions are unlikely to be lifted anytime soon, India could exercise its strategic autonomy to take this cooperation forward. In recent years, Iran has developed modern weapons platforms such as short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, hypersonic missiles, and armed drones. In April 2024, for instance, it unveiled its updated Bavar-373 Advance Air Defence System, which is projected as being as powerful and lethal as the Russian S-400 system.

To combat terror groups operating in Pakistan, India and Iran could conduct joint military counterterrorism exercises. Such exercises, when carried out in Iran, could be held along its Pakistan border, in such areas that would prove beneficial to Iran in case of a military contingency. With India facing a two-front threat from China and Pakistan, India and Iran collaborating militarily could prove an effective deterrent against Pakistan. On the naval front, port calls at crucial Iranian ports and the development of logistical facilities in the Persian Gulf within close proximity of Pakistani ports, could prove a master stroke in military diplomacy.

i In February 2024 in New Delhi, Petronet LNG (India) and Qatar Energy signed their latest US\$78-billion contract, on the sidelines of the India Energy Week. According to it, Qatar will supply 7.5 million tonnes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) annually to India for 20 years, at a price lower than in the existing contract. The deal will kick in from 2028, when the existing deal expires, and remain valid till 2048. Earlier, in July 2023, Abu Dhabi National Oil Co (ADNOC) and Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) also signed a contract for supply of 1.2 million tonnes to India annually for 14 years.

Options and Opportunities

Moreover, close naval cooperation with Iran will help ensure safe passage of Indian ships, as well as security of sea lanes, in the Arabian Sea. Iran has often granted safe passage to Indian ships in the past even during conflicts. Despite its faceoff with the United States in the Persian Gulf in 2019, for instance, it cooperated with India to make India's Operation Sankalp—intended to ensure safe transit of Indian vessels through the Strait of Hormuz—a success.³⁶ Iran could also help India keep sea pirates in the region at bay.

Conclusion

India and Iran can achieve a lot together. In his third term as prime minister, Modi is looking to further strengthen India's outreach and strategic convergence in West Asia. Similarly, Iran wants to consolidate its diplomatic gains of recent years by acquiring reliable and trustworthy new partners. A re-energised engagement between these two ancient civilisations would set things moving in the right direction. [ORF](#)

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