

GEOPOLITICS OF INDIA AND IRAN

Since 1947

**HISTORY, STRATEGY, ENERGY, CONNECTIVITY AND
REGIONAL POWER POLITICS**

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Preface

The relationship between India and Iran is one of the most profound, layered and strategically significant relationships in Asian geopolitics, carrying within it the weight of civilizational memory, the pressure of contemporary power politics and the promise of future regional transformation. This book, *Geopolitics of India and Iran Since 1947: History, Strategy, Energy, Connectivity and Regional Power Politics*, has been written with the purpose of examining this relationship not as a narrow bilateral engagement, but as a wide geopolitical phenomenon shaped by history, geography, diplomacy, ideology, economy, security and changing international power structures. India and Iran are not merely two states connected by trade agreements or diplomatic visits; they are two ancient civilizational spaces whose interactions have influenced language, literature, architecture, culture, commerce, religion and political imagination across centuries. In the modern era, especially after 1947, their relationship has acquired new meanings because the compulsions of nation-building, Cold War alignments, post-Cold War restructuring, energy dependence, maritime strategy, regional connectivity, sanctions, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States have repeatedly shaped the direction, intensity and limitations of their cooperation. The present work therefore seeks to understand India–Iran relations as a dynamic geopolitical process in which continuity and change operate together, where civilizational closeness coexists with strategic caution, and where possibilities of partnership are often tested by external pressures and regional uncertainty.

The intellectual foundation of this book rests on the idea that geography is never a passive background in international relations; rather, it is an active force that influences national interest, foreign policy choices and strategic behaviour. Iran occupies a commanding location in West Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and near the Strait of Hormuz, while India stands as a major South Asian and Indian Ocean power with expanding interests in West Asia, Central Asia and Eurasia. The geographical placement of both countries gives them special importance in each other's strategic calculations. For India, Iran provides a crucial continental and maritime opening towards Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe, especially in the absence of

direct land access through Pakistan. For Iran, India represents a major Asian power, a vast market, a civilizational partner and a diplomatic actor capable of engaging beyond rigid bloc politics. This book attempts to show that the India–Iran relationship cannot be understood only through the language of friendship or disagreement; it must be understood through the language of access, routes, energy corridors, strategic depth, balancing, autonomy and regional architecture. In this sense, geopolitics becomes the meeting point of geography, power and foreign policy, and India–Iran relations become a valuable case study of how states pursue their interests under conditions of opportunity, constraint and uncertainty.

A major concern of this book is to trace the historical movement of India–Iran relations from independence to the present with sensitivity to different phases of global politics. The early decades after 1947 were marked by diplomatic goodwill but strategic limitations, because India followed non-alignment and strategic autonomy while Iran under the Shah remained closely connected with the Western bloc and the United States. The Cold War, Pakistan factor and different strategic alignments limited the depth of India–Iran cooperation, although cultural, diplomatic and trade engagements continued. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 brought a major transformation in Iran’s domestic and foreign policy orientation, replacing the monarchy with the Islamic Republic and introducing a new ideological, regional and anti-Western posture. India’s response to revolutionary Iran was cautious but pragmatic, showing its capacity to maintain diplomatic continuity while protecting national interests. The Iran–Iraq War, energy concerns and regional instability made the 1980s a period of careful diplomacy. After the end of the Cold War, however, new possibilities emerged. India’s economic liberalization, Iran’s search for new partners, the transformation of Afghanistan after 2001 and India’s Look West orientation created fresh strategic convergence. Thus, the relationship gradually moved from limited interaction to pragmatic engagement and then towards connectivity-based strategic cooperation.

The book gives special attention to Iran’s geostrategic importance for India because Iran is one of the few countries that can connect India’s maritime reach with continental ambitions. India’s desire to access Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia has long been restricted by Pakistan’s refusal to provide direct land connectivity. In this context, Iran becomes not only a

friendly country but a strategic gateway. Chabahar Port, the International North-South Transport Corridor and associated road, rail and maritime routes form the infrastructural heart of India's connectivity strategy through Iran. Chabahar is not merely a port project; it is a geopolitical instrument that allows India to bypass Pakistan, reach Afghanistan, engage Central Asia, strengthen its presence in the Arabian Sea and balance the strategic weight of China-supported Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Similarly, the International North-South Transport Corridor offers India a shorter and potentially more efficient route to Russia, Europe and Eurasian markets through Iran and the Caspian region. These connectivity initiatives demonstrate that the India-Iran relationship is not only historical or diplomatic but also infrastructural and spatial. They show how ports, roads, corridors and terminals can become instruments of foreign policy, economic diplomacy and regional influence.

Energy security forms another essential pillar of India-Iran relations. India's growing economy, expanding industrial base and large population have made energy a central concern of its foreign policy. West Asia has long remained vital for India's oil and gas requirements, and Iran, with its immense hydrocarbon resources, has naturally occupied a significant place in India's energy imagination. Iranian oil and natural gas have offered India the possibility of diversification, affordability and strategic energy partnership. However, this potential has been repeatedly constrained by sanctions, banking restrictions, payment difficulties and geopolitical pressure arising from U.S.-Iran hostility. The decline of Indian oil imports from Iran, the complications of payment mechanisms and uncertainty around future energy cooperation reveal the vulnerability of economic relations when they are placed within a larger sanctions regime. Yet the energy chapter of India-Iran relations cannot be considered closed. The possibility of oil trade revival, gas cooperation, petrochemical engagement and even renewable energy collaboration continues to remain relevant. This book therefore examines energy not only as a commercial issue but as a strategic question linked with sovereignty, autonomy, external pressure and India's long-term national interest.

The regional environment surrounding India and Iran is complex, volatile and deeply interconnected. Afghanistan has been a shared strategic concern for both countries, particularly after 2001, when India and Iran found common ground in reconstruction, infrastructure development, humanitarian

assistance and concern over extremist forces. The return of the Taliban introduced new diplomatic dilemmas, security anxieties and humanitarian challenges. Pakistan remains another decisive factor because India's use of Iranian routes is partly driven by the need to overcome Pakistan-controlled geographical restrictions, while Iran itself must balance its ties with Pakistan due to border security, economic interests and regional compulsions. China has added another layer to this strategic complexity through its Belt and Road Initiative, its partnership with Pakistan, its role in Gwadar and its growing engagement with Iran. The China–Pakistan–Iran triangle has important implications for India's continental and maritime strategy. At the same time, the United States, Israel and Gulf Arab states remain central to the wider geopolitical framework within which India deals with Iran. India's relations with the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have expanded significantly, while Iran's rivalry with the United States and Israel continues to influence regional politics. This book therefore presents India's Iran policy as an exercise in sophisticated balancing rather than simple alignment.

One of the key arguments of this book is that India's policy towards Iran reflects the broader character of Indian foreign policy: strategic autonomy, pragmatic diplomacy and issue-based engagement. India has neither abandoned Iran under external pressure nor ignored the realities of its growing partnerships with the United States, Israel and Gulf states. Instead, India has attempted to maintain a calibrated approach in which national interest remains central. This balancing is not always easy, and at times it produces delays, caution and policy ambiguity. Yet it also reveals India's desire to act as an independent Asian power rather than a subordinate actor within any single geopolitical bloc. Iran, too, has pursued its own strategic choices by engaging with China, Russia, Pakistan, Central Asian states and regional actors while maintaining historical and diplomatic engagement with India. The India–Iran relationship is therefore best understood as a relationship of convergence without complete alignment, cooperation without dependency and historical affinity without strategic simplicity. It is a relationship in which both countries see value in partnership, but both must continuously negotiate the pressures of regional rivalry, global sanctions, domestic priorities and changing international alignments.

This book has been prepared for students, researchers, teachers, policy observers, diplomats, strategic analysts and all serious readers interested in the geopolitics of South Asia, West Asia and the emerging Asian order. It attempts to combine historical depth with contemporary relevance and to present India–Iran relations in a systematic, comprehensive and analytically balanced manner. The chapters move from the conceptual meaning of geopolitics to civilizational background, Cold War history, the Iranian Revolution, post-Cold War convergence, energy, Chabahar, INSTC, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, the United States, Israel–Gulf politics, defence, nuclear issues, trade, cultural diplomacy, challenges, contemporary relations and future prospects. The intention is not merely to describe events but to interpret the forces that have shaped them. In an age when Asia is becoming a central theatre of global power transformation, India and Iran will continue to matter for regional connectivity, energy security, maritime routes, continental access, diplomatic balancing and the future structure of Eurasian cooperation. It is hoped that this book will contribute to a deeper, more mature and more nuanced understanding of India–Iran geopolitics and will encourage further academic inquiry into one of the most consequential yet often underexplored relationships in Asia.

About the Author

Dr. Parveen Kumar is a distinguished academician, experienced teacher educator, researcher, author and institutional leader whose scholarly contribution to the field of education has been marked by commitment, intellectual depth and a long tradition of academic service. He is presently serving as an Associate Professor at Sparsh Himalaya University, Doiwala, Dehradun, where he continues to contribute to higher education through teaching, research guidance, academic planning and the development of scholarly culture among students and researchers. His academic personality reflects a rare combination of classroom excellence, research orientation, administrative maturity and social responsibility. Over the years, Dr. Kumar has established himself as a dedicated educationist who believes that education is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but a transformative process through which human personality, social values, national consciousness and professional competence are developed. His work has consistently emphasized the importance of disciplined scholarship, meaningful research, value-based education and the scientific study of educational problems.

Before joining his present academic position, Dr. Parveen Kumar rendered long and valuable service in K.L.D.A.V. P.G. College, Roorkee, in the Department of Education, where he taught for many years from 2008 to 2023. During this period, he played an important role in shaping the academic understanding, professional attitude and research aptitude of a large number of students. His teaching career at K.L.D.A.V. P.G. College was marked by sincerity, punctuality, conceptual clarity and deep concern for learners. He guided students not only in understanding educational theories, psychological foundations, teaching-learning processes and research methodology, but also in developing confidence, academic discipline and professional ethics. His classroom teaching was known for its analytical approach, clear explanation, practical examples and ability to connect educational concepts with real-life situations. Through continuous academic engagement, he contributed significantly to the enrichment of teacher education and helped many students become thoughtful teachers, reflective practitioners and responsible members of society.

Dr. Parveen Kumar has also served as Principal of Himalayan Doon Academy, Sikandarpur, Bhagwanpur, where he demonstrated his administrative capability, leadership qualities and vision for institutional development. As Principal, he worked with a constructive educational philosophy in which discipline, academic quality, moral values, teacher motivation and student welfare received equal attention. His administrative approach was not merely managerial but deeply educational, as he understood that an institution grows only when teachers, students, parents and the surrounding community work together with a common purpose. Under his leadership, emphasis was placed on creating a healthy academic environment, encouraging student participation, improving teaching practices and strengthening the overall culture of learning. His experience as an institutional head further enriched his understanding of educational administration, school management, classroom realities and the challenges faced by teachers and learners at different levels of education.

As an author, Dr. Parveen Kumar has already written five books in the field of education, thereby making an important contribution to academic literature and teacher education. His writings reflect his wide understanding of educational philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, research methodology, measurement and evaluation, inclusive education, modern educational trends and social concerns related to schooling and higher education. His books are written with the purpose of making educational knowledge systematic, meaningful and useful for students, teachers, researchers and educational institutions. He possesses the ability to present complex academic ideas in a structured and understandable manner while maintaining scholarly seriousness and conceptual depth. His authorship is not limited to the collection of information; rather, it reflects interpretation, analysis, educational vision and a strong desire to support learners in their academic journey. Through his books, he has attempted to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to provide material that can be useful for both examination purposes and deeper academic understanding.

Dr. Parveen Kumar has made remarkable contributions in the field of educational research by helping and guiding approximately 105 students in their research work. His role as a research guide and academic mentor has been highly significant because he has supported students in selecting research problems, framing objectives and hypotheses, developing tools,

collecting data, applying suitable statistical techniques and interpreting research findings in a meaningful way. His guidance has helped students understand research not as a mechanical activity, but as a disciplined intellectual process based on clarity, objectivity, validity and social relevance. He has encouraged young researchers to work on important areas of education, psychology, teacher education, learning problems, inclusive education, values, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, adjustment, classroom behaviour and other significant themes. His patient guidance, academic seriousness and methodological understanding have enabled many students to complete their research work with confidence and quality.

One of the most important dimensions of Dr. Parveen Kumar's academic contribution is his work in the development of research tools in the fields of education and psychology. He has developed many research tools for measuring educational, psychological, social and behavioural variables, thereby contributing to the methodological needs of researchers and students. His interest in tool development reflects his strong understanding of measurement, evaluation, reliability, validity, item analysis, norm development and psychological scaling. In the field of education and psychology, good research depends greatly upon appropriate and scientifically constructed tools, and Dr. Kumar has worked sincerely in this direction by preparing instruments that can be used for academic and research purposes. His contribution as a teacher educator, author, research mentor, administrator and tool developer makes him a respected academic personality. Dr. Parveen Kumar's life and work represent dedication to education, service to students, commitment to research and faith in the power of knowledge to build a better society.

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1. Introduction

India–Iran relations constitute one of the most layered, durable and geopolitically consequential relationships in the wider Asian diplomatic imagination. They are not merely the product of contemporary statecraft; they are the modern expression of an ancient civilizational continuum, a historical palimpsest upon which language, spirituality, trade, culture, empire, migration, maritime contact, continental routes and strategic anxieties have been inscribed across millennia. The relationship carries within it the memory of Indo-Iranian linguistic affinities, Achaemenid contacts with north-western India, Sassanian interactions, Buddhist transmissions, Persianate literary and administrative traditions, Sufi spiritual linkages, Mughal–Safavid exchanges, maritime commerce through the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf, and the modern logic of energy security, regional connectivity, Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, the International North–South Transport Corridor, and the wider West Asian balance of power. In the architecture of India’s foreign policy, Iran occupies a position that cannot be understood through a single category such as energy supplier, neighbour of Afghanistan, West Asian power, Islamic Republic, Persian civilizational state, or strategic transit corridor. It is all of these simultaneously. Iran is a pivotal country because its geography gives it access to the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Caspian basin, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the western approaches to Afghanistan and Pakistan. India, on the other hand, stands at the commanding maritime centre of the Indian Ocean, with a continental history tied to Central Asia and a maritime destiny tied to the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific. Therefore, India–Iran relations must be studied as a meeting point of civilizational memory and hard geopolitics, of cultural softness and strategic compulsion, of diplomatic prudence and regional necessity.

The subject acquires special salience because both countries have historically pursued a measure of strategic autonomy. India’s external conduct has been shaped by non-alignment, later multi-alignment, civilizational pluralism, developmental diplomacy and a preference for dialogue over bloc politics. Iran, despite its own ideological, revolutionary and regional particularities, has projected itself as an independent pole in West Asia, resistant to external tutelage and deeply conscious of its historical identity as Persia. This shared

sensitivity to sovereignty, dignity and autonomy has often created mutual understanding, even when external pressures, sanctions, regional conflicts and great-power contestations have complicated the bilateral agenda. Thus, India–Iran relations are not linear; they are episodic, resilient, sometimes constrained, yet structurally significant.

The present chapter introduces the historical, geopolitical and conceptual foundations necessary for understanding India–Iran relations. It first discusses the background of India–Iran relations by examining historical and civilizational linkages, Iran’s importance in India’s West Asia policy, and the geopolitical relevance of bilateral relations since 1947. It then explains the meaning and scope of geopolitics, the concept of geopolitics in international relations, Iran’s geostrategic location in West Asia, and India’s strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region. The chapter proceeds from the conviction that geography does not mechanically determine policy, but it profoundly conditions diplomatic options, strategic anxieties, economic opportunities and civilizational interactions.

1.1 Background of India–Iran Relations

India and Iran are among the world’s oldest civilizational entities, and their relationship cannot be adequately captured by the vocabulary of conventional diplomacy alone. It is a relationship of shared antiquity, cultural interpenetration and historical continuity. The peoples inhabiting the Iranian plateau and the Indian subcontinent have interacted through overland routes, maritime pathways, imperial systems, religious networks, linguistic traditions and artistic exchanges. In the deep past, Indo-Iranian linguistic and cultural affinities shaped common traditions; in the classical and medieval periods, contacts through trade, Buddhism, Zoroastrian migrations, Sufism and Persian literature enriched the subcontinent; in the early modern period, Persian became one of the great languages of administration, high culture, diplomacy and intellectual life in India; and in the modern period, the two sovereign states have attempted to translate this civilizational intimacy into political, economic and strategic cooperation. India–Iran relations is also marked by their shared location in the extended Asian geopolitical theatre. India is the pre-eminent South Asian and Indian Ocean power, while Iran is a major West Asian and Persian Gulf power. Between them lie Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Arabian Sea and the wider Central Asian space. This geography creates both distance and proximity. There is no direct land border

between independent India and Iran after Partition, but there remains a powerful geostrategic adjacency through Afghanistan, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf. The loss of direct territorial contiguity after 1947 transformed the logistics of India's Central Asian access and made Iran indispensable for alternative connectivity. In this sense, Iran's importance to India is not accidental; it is rooted in the post-Partition geopolitical map of South and West Asia.

The modern relationship formally entered the diplomatic framework after Indian independence and the establishment of official ties between the two states. The Treaty of Friendship in 1950 provided the normative foundation for a sovereign relationship between the Republic of India and Iran. Yet the Cold War introduced complexities. Iran under the Shah aligned closely with the Western security architecture and became part of anti-Soviet regional arrangements, while India remained formally non-aligned but maintained close defence and political relations with the Soviet Union. Despite such differences, both states retained channels of communication. India's policy was guided by a long-term civilizational vision and a pragmatic understanding that Iran's position in the Gulf and Central Asian approaches made it too important to be viewed merely through ideological lenses.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the relationship entered a new phase. India had to adjust to a transformed Iranian political order, while Iran had to engage a secular, democratic and plural India that maintained relations with Iraq, the Arab Gulf, Israel, the Soviet Union/Russia and the West. The Iran–Iraq War, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the emergence of Pakistan-backed militancy, the Taliban question, Western sanctions against Iran, and the politics of oil and nuclear negotiations all affected the bilateral rhythm. Yet India and Iran repeatedly discovered convergences: opposition to Taliban extremism in the 1990s, interest in Afghanistan's stability, energy cooperation, maritime and port connectivity, and the idea of connecting India to Central Asia and Russia through Iranian territory.

In the twenty-first century, the relationship acquired renewed strategic vocabulary. The Tehran Declaration of 2001, the New Delhi Declaration of 2003, the 2016 India–Iran joint statement “Civilizational Connect, Contemporary Context,” the Trilateral Agreement on Trade, Transport and Transit involving India, Iran and Afghanistan, and the subsequent focus on Chabahar Port and the International North–South Transport Corridor

transformed the relationship from historical goodwill into a connectivity-centred strategic partnership. The phrase “civilizational connect” is particularly significant because it acknowledges that India–Iran relations are not only transactional; they derive legitimacy from historical depth while seeking relevance in contemporary economic and geopolitical conditions. India–Iran relations, therefore, must be read as a synthesis of memory and strategy. Cultural memory gives warmth, trust and symbolic legitimacy to the relationship; strategic necessity gives it urgency, continuity and policy relevance. The background of the relationship is neither romantic nostalgia nor cold calculation alone. It is a sophisticated interweaving of the two. The continuity of Persian influence in Indian culture, the presence of Indian communities and traders in the Gulf, the importance of Iranian oil and gas to Indian energy calculations, the need for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the role of Iran in West Asian stability together make the relationship one of India’s most consequential engagements in its extended neighbourhood.

1.1.1 Historical and Civilizational Linkages Between India and Iran

The historical relationship between India and Iran begins in the realm of civilizational kinship. Long before the emergence of modern nation-states, the Indo-Iranian cultural world reflected affinities in language, mythology, social imagination and religious vocabulary. Sanskrit and Avestan, the ancient sacred languages associated with Vedic and Zoroastrian traditions, reveal deep linguistic connections. The Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family indicates that the ancestors of Indo-Aryan and Iranian-speaking peoples shared earlier cultural and linguistic horizons before their historical differentiation. This ancient connection does not imply political unity in the modern sense, but it does establish a profound civilizational proximity that shaped perceptions of familiarity between the two cultural worlds. Archaeological and historical evidence also indicates commercial and cultural contacts between the Indus Valley world and regions of Iran and Mesopotamia. The movement of goods such as precious stones, metals, textiles, ivory and craft objects through the Persian Gulf and overland corridors created early patterns of interdependence. Ancient trade was not merely economic; it was a vehicle of artistic motifs, religious ideas, technological skills and social practices. The Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea were not barriers but corridors of interaction. Coastal Gujarat, Sindh, Makran,

southern Iran and Mesopotamia formed a maritime-commercial ecology in which merchants, sailors and cultural intermediaries

The Achaemenid Empire brought parts of north-western India into contact with imperial Persian administrative systems. This interaction introduced channels through which political ideas, administrative practices, artistic styles and imperial symbolism travelled. Later, during the Sassanian period, India and Persia continued to interact through diplomacy, trade and intellectual exchange. Indian astronomy, medicine, fables and mathematical knowledge travelled westward, while Persian artistic, courtly and religious influences moved eastward. The famous transmission of Indian stories such as the Panchatantra into Persian and Arabic literary worlds illustrates how knowledge moved through Iran into wider West Asian and Mediterranean intellectual circuits. The advent of Islam added a new layer to India–Iran relations. Iran became one of the great centres of Islamic civilization, but it preserved and reconfigured its Persian cultural identity within the Islamic world. As Islam expanded into Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, Persian emerged as a major language of refinement, administration, diplomacy and literary expression. In medieval India, Persian was not merely a foreign language; it became a language of courtly culture, statecraft, historiography, poetry and elite communication. From the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal Empire, Persian literary and administrative traditions played a formative role in shaping Indo-Islamic civilization.

Sufism provided another powerful bridge between India and Iran. Persian Sufi thought, poetry and metaphysics profoundly influenced the spiritual landscape of India. The works of Rumi, Hafez, Saadi, Attar and Jami entered Indian intellectual life, while Sufi orders created networks that linked Iran, Central Asia and India. These spiritual currents softened political frontiers and built emotional geographies of devotion. The Persian language became a vehicle of mystical experience, ethical reflection and aesthetic refinement. Indo-Persian culture, therefore, was not a superficial courtly import; it was a deep cultural formation that shaped literature, architecture, music, painting, historiography and manners.

The Mughal–Safavid period deserves particular attention because it represented one of the most sophisticated phases of Indo-Iranian cultural and diplomatic exchange. The Mughal court in India and the Safavid court in Iran interacted through ambassadors, scholars, poets, painters, theologians,

merchants and political refugees. Many Iranian nobles, artists and intellectuals found patronage in India, contributing to the splendour of Mughal culture. The Indo-Persian style became visible in miniature painting, garden design, calligraphy, architecture and literary production. The Taj Mahal, Mughal gardens, Indo-Persian chronicles and courtly etiquette all bear testimony to Persianate influence, though they were creatively Indianized rather than mechanically copied. The migration of Zoroastrians from Iran to India, especially to western coastal regions such as Gujarat, added a human and religious dimension to the civilizational bond. The Parsi community became one of India's most distinguished minority communities, contributing immensely to commerce, industry, philanthropy, science, law, education and public life. Their presence is a living reminder that India historically offered cultural refuge and social space to communities fleeing religious or political pressures. The Parsi experience also symbolizes India's civilizational capacity to absorb without erasing, and to preserve diversity within a larger pluralistic framework.

In modern times, the civilizational linkage has been consciously invoked by political leaders and cultural institutions. Indian and Iranian scholars have studied each other's literature, history and philosophy; cultural centres, academic exchanges, tourism, cinema, language studies and people-to-people relations have sustained mutual awareness. Persian studies in India and Indology in Iran continue to remind both nations that their relationship has a *longue durée* extending far beyond modern diplomatic documents. The cultural relationship, therefore, gives India–Iran ties a depth unavailable in purely strategic partnerships. It creates reservoirs of goodwill that can help manage political irritants and sustain dialogue even during difficult phases.

1.1.2 Importance of Iran in India's West Asia Policy

Iran occupies an indispensable place in India's West Asia policy because it combines civilizational prestige, geographic centrality, energy significance, connectivity potential and regional influence. India's West Asia policy has historically required careful equilibrium among mutually antagonistic regional actors: Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Qatar, Oman and others. India's diplomatic art has consisted in maintaining productive relations with all, without becoming entrapped in sectarian, ideological or bloc rivalries. Within this delicate mosaic, Iran is significant because it is neither simply a Gulf state nor merely a continental

neighbour of Central Asia; it is a bridge between several geopolitical theatres. Energy security has long been one of the major reasons for India's engagement with Iran. India's economic expansion requires reliable access to hydrocarbons, and the Persian Gulf has been central to India's energy basket. Iran, endowed with substantial oil and gas resources, historically emerged as an attractive partner for Indian energy diversification. Although sanctions and payment difficulties have periodically constrained energy trade, the structural logic remains powerful: India needs diversified energy sources, and Iran seeks stable Asian markets. Energy diplomacy with Iran thus intersects with India's broader concern for affordability, security of supply, and insulation from global price shocks. Iran's importance is also rooted in Afghanistan and Central Asia. After Partition, India lost direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia through territories that became Pakistan. This created a strategic handicap. Iran offers India an alternative westward corridor that can bypass Pakistan and connect Indian commerce with Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. Chabahar Port, particularly the Shahid Beheshti terminal, is central to this vision. It gives India a maritime entry point into Iran's south-eastern coast and then onwards toward Afghanistan and Central Asian markets. Thus, Iran is not only a country in India's West Asia policy; it is a corridor in India's continental strategy.

The International North–South Transport Corridor further enhances Iran's role. The INSTC seeks to connect India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through a multimodal network involving sea, rail and road routes. For India, this offers an alternative to traditional sea routes through the Suez Canal and also reduces dependence on routes vulnerable to geopolitical disruption. Iran's ports, railways and road networks are therefore central to India's imagination of Eurasian connectivity. In this sense, Iran functions as a geoeconomic hinge between the Indian Ocean and the Eurasian landmass. Iran is also important because it is a major actor in the politics of West Asian stability. Its influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, the Gulf and the broader Shia political world gives it a regional weight that India cannot ignore. India has a large diaspora in West Asia, major trade interests, energy dependencies and maritime security concerns. Any escalation involving Iran can affect oil prices, shipping lanes, expatriate safety, remittances and regional stability. Therefore, India's engagement with Iran is not a matter of bilateral preference alone; it is part of India's risk-management strategy in a volatile extended neighbourhood.

India's policy toward Iran also reflects strategic autonomy. New Delhi has had to navigate between its relations with the United States, Israel and Arab Gulf states on the one hand, and its interests with Iran on the other. This requires diplomatic dexterity. India has generally avoided rhetorical maximalism and has preferred calibrated engagement, quiet negotiation and issue-based cooperation. It has maintained that dialogue, diplomacy and restraint are preferable to confrontation. Such a position is consistent with India's broader foreign policy temperament: avoid unnecessary entanglement, preserve room for manoeuvre, and pursue national interest through pragmatic plural engagement.

The importance of Iran in India's West Asia policy, therefore, lies in a convergence of factors: energy, connectivity, Afghanistan, Central Asia, maritime access, regional balance, strategic autonomy and civilizational diplomacy. Iran gives India a western gateway; India gives Iran an eastern partner with market potential, diplomatic credibility and civilizational sympathy. The relationship is not free from constraints, especially sanctions, banking difficulties, regional rivalries and external pressure. Nevertheless, the strategic logic of engagement remains resilient because geography repeatedly brings India and Iran back to the table.

1.1.3 Geopolitical Relevance of India–Iran Relations Since 1947

Since 1947, India–Iran relations have evolved through several geopolitical phases, each shaped by the wider international system. In the early post-independence period, both states emerged from different historical experiences: India from British colonial rule and Partition, Iran from monarchical politics under significant Western influence. Formal diplomatic relations and the Treaty of Friendship in 1950 provided the institutional beginning of the relationship. Yet the Cold War soon created divergent alignments. Iran under the Shah became associated with Western-led security arrangements, while India maintained non-alignment and developed close ties with the Soviet Union. Despite these differences, India did not view Iran as an adversary; rather, it saw Iran as a historically connected state whose long-term relevance transcended temporary alignments.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution altered the regional and ideological context. Iran's foreign policy became revolutionary, anti-Western and deeply shaped by its new Islamic republican identity. India, however, adopted a pragmatic approach. It recognized the new political reality and maintained engagement.

During the Iran–Iraq War, India sought balance, avoiding excessive identification with either side. This was characteristic of Indian diplomacy: preserve relations, avoid rigid bloc behaviour, and keep communication open. The war affected Gulf stability, shipping and energy flows, all of which were directly relevant to India’s interests. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and later the rise of the Taliban created another phase of convergence. India and Iran shared concerns about extremist forces in Afghanistan, particularly during the 1990s when the Taliban’s rise threatened regional pluralism and security. Both countries supported anti-Taliban forces in different ways and viewed Afghanistan’s stability as essential to regional order. This convergence demonstrated that India–Iran relations were not merely cultural or economic; they had direct security relevance. Afghanistan became a strategic theatre where Indian and Iranian interests overlapped significantly.

The end of the Cold War and India’s economic liberalization opened new possibilities. India’s foreign policy became more economically oriented and more willing to pursue multiple partnerships simultaneously. Iran became important as an energy partner and as a route to Central Asia. The 2001 Tehran Declaration and the 2003 New Delhi Declaration represented attempts to elevate the relationship. These documents reflected a shared desire to expand cooperation in trade, energy, science, technology, culture and regional affairs. They also revealed a common interest in a multipolar Asia where no single external power could monopolize regional outcomes. The 2000s and 2010s also brought constraints. International concerns over Iran’s nuclear programme, UN and unilateral sanctions, payment problems, banking restrictions and U.S. pressure limited India’s ability to pursue energy and infrastructure cooperation at the desired speed. India had to balance its civil nuclear agreement with the United States, its growing ties with Israel and Gulf Arab states, and its continuing interests in Iran. This period tested India’s strategic autonomy. New Delhi could not ignore U.S. sanctions, but neither could it abandon Iran’s long-term value. The result was a cautious, sometimes slow, but persistent engagement. The Chabahar project became the most visible symbol of India–Iran geopolitical cooperation. For India, Chabahar is not only a port; it is a strategic answer to continental blockage. It allows India to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia without depending on Pakistan. It also complements the INSTC and strengthens India’s role in Eurasian connectivity. For Iran, Chabahar offers investment, development of its south-eastern region, and a way to diversify its external partnerships. The project

therefore has trilateral and regional implications: India gains access, Iran gains infrastructure and relevance, Afghanistan and Central Asia gain alternative connectivity options.

Since 1947, India–Iran relations have therefore moved from civilizational goodwill to formal diplomacy, from Cold War caution to post-Cold War strategic convergence, from energy trade to connectivity partnership, and from bilateral symbolism to regional geoeconomics. The relationship remains complex because it is embedded in multiple pressures: U.S.–Iran hostility, Arab–Iran rivalry, Israel–Iran tensions, sanctions, Afghanistan’s instability, Pakistan’s geography, and shifting great-power politics. Yet its relevance has not diminished. On the contrary, as connectivity, energy, maritime security and Eurasian geopolitics become more important, India–Iran relations acquire renewed significance. The geopolitical relevance of the relationship lies in its ability to connect three theatres: West Asia, South Asia and Central Asia. It enables India to act beyond the constraints of subcontinental geography. It enables Iran to look eastward toward a major Asian power. It provides both states with diplomatic depth in a turbulent region. Since 1947, therefore, India–Iran relations have remained a strategic necessity disguised at times as a cultural friendship. The cultural layer gives it warmth; the geopolitical layer gives it endurance.

1.2 Meaning and Scope of Geopolitics

Geopolitics is the study of how geography influences power, policy, security, economy and international relations. It examines the relationship between physical space and political behaviour: mountains, seas, rivers, deserts, straits, resources, ports, borders, chokepoints, islands, corridors, demographic concentrations, technological infrastructures and trade routes. Geopolitics does not claim that geography alone determines destiny; rather, it argues that geography creates possibilities, constraints and strategic pressures within which states formulate policy. Geography is the stage; politics is the performance; power is the instrument; strategy is the script. The term geopolitics emerged in modern European political thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, associated with thinkers such as Rudolf Kjellén, Friedrich Ratzel, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman. Their approaches differed, but they shared a concern with the political consequences of space. Mahan emphasized sea power, naval strength, maritime commerce and control of sea routes. Mackinder

emphasized land power and the strategic importance of the Eurasian heartland. Spykman later emphasized the rimland, the coastal belt of Eurasia, as a zone of decisive strategic competition. These theories are not to be applied mechanically, but they provide conceptual tools for understanding why certain regions, straits, ports and corridors repeatedly become theatres of competition. The scope of geopolitics has expanded considerably in the contemporary era. Classical geopolitics focused on territory, military power, sea routes, imperial expansion and continental rivalry. Modern geopolitics includes energy security, supply chains, digital infrastructure, satellite systems, cyber networks, maritime domain awareness, climate vulnerability, migration, food security, rare earth minerals, financial sanctions, ports, pipelines, cables and technological standards. The geopolitics of the twenty-first century is therefore both physical and invisible: it includes visible geography such as Hormuz, Malacca, Chabahar, Gwadar and the Indian Ocean, and invisible geographies such as data routes, payment systems, sanctions regimes and digital platforms.

In the context of India–Iran relations, geopolitics provides the analytical framework for understanding why the relationship matters beyond sentiment. Historical affection alone cannot explain Chabahar; cultural memory alone cannot explain India’s interest in the INSTC; diplomatic cordiality alone cannot explain Iran’s importance in Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. These are geopolitical questions because they concern access, influence, routes, strategic autonomy, regional balance and national security. India and Iran are connected by the geography of the Arabian Sea, the Gulf, Afghanistan and Eurasia. Their relationship is therefore a case study in how civilizational ties can be reactivated through geopolitical necessity.

Geopolitics also includes the study of vulnerability. States ask not only what they can access, but what can be denied to them. India’s lack of direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia after Partition created a geopolitical vulnerability. Iran’s experience of sanctions and external pressure created its own vulnerability. Chabahar and the INSTC can be interpreted as attempts to reduce such vulnerabilities by creating alternative routes and strategic options. Thus, geopolitics is not merely the pursuit of dominance; it is also the pursuit of resilience. The scope of geopolitics further includes diplomatic balancing. India’s relations with Iran must be balanced with its relations with the United States, Russia, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf states.

Iran's relations with India must be balanced with its own priorities involving China, Russia, Central Asia, Iraq, the Gulf and the West. Therefore, geopolitics is not simply about maps; it is about map-based choices under conditions of uncertainty. It demands prudence, timing, ambiguity, flexibility and strategic patience.

1.2.1 Concept of Geopolitics in International Relations

In international relations, geopolitics refers to the influence of geographical conditions on the distribution, exercise and contestation of power among states and other actors. It links the territorial and spatial realities of the world with diplomatic behaviour, military planning, economic strategy and national interest. International relations theory often speaks of power, sovereignty, institutions, norms and identity; geopolitics adds the indispensable dimension of location. A state's power is not only measured by its economy or military; it is also shaped by where it is located, what routes it controls, what resources it possesses, what neighbours surround it, and what seas, mountains or deserts protect or expose it. Classical realist thought and geopolitics share a concern with power and security, but geopolitics provides a more spatial vocabulary. A realist may say that states seek security in an anarchic international system; a geopolitical analyst asks how mountains, oceans, chokepoints, corridors, ports and resource basins affect that search for security. For example, Iran's location near the Strait of Hormuz gives it strategic leverage; India's location in the Indian Ocean gives it maritime responsibility and opportunity; Pakistan's position between India and Afghanistan creates a connectivity constraint; Central Asia's landlocked geography increases the value of transit corridors; and the Persian Gulf's hydrocarbon concentration makes it central to global energy politics. The concept of geopolitics also helps explain why certain places become recurrently important. The Strait of Hormuz, Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb, Strait of Malacca, South China Sea, Bosphorus, Panama Canal, Chabahar, Gwadar, Djibouti and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are not ordinary locations. They are strategic nodes because they connect flows of energy, trade, military movement and political influence. Whoever secures access to such nodes gains leverage; whoever is denied access suffers strategic limitation. In this sense, geopolitics is the grammar of access.

In India–Iran relations, geopolitics operates at multiple levels. At the bilateral level, it shapes cooperation in energy, trade and culture. At the regional level,

it connects India to Afghanistan and Central Asia through Iran. At the maritime level, it links the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. At the global level, it is influenced by U.S. sanctions, Russian connectivity interests, Chinese infrastructure diplomacy and European energy concerns. Therefore, a single bilateral relationship is embedded in concentric circles of geopolitical influence. The concept also includes geoeconomics, which is the use of economic instruments for strategic purposes. Ports, railways, pipelines, trade corridors, special economic zones, payment mechanisms, sanctions and investment flows are geoeconomic tools. Chabahar is a geoeconomic project with geopolitical consequences. The INSTC is a connectivity project with strategic implications. Energy trade is an economic transaction with diplomatic significance. In the contemporary world, geopolitics and geoeconomics are inseparable because routes of commerce are also routes of influence.

Geopolitics in international relations must, however, be used with analytical caution. Geography does not command states like an iron law. Leadership, ideology, technology, diplomacy, domestic politics, economic capacity and international institutions can modify geographical compulsions. For example, air power, cyber systems, satellites and digital finance have transformed classical geography, yet they have not abolished it. Ships still pass through chokepoints; pipelines still cross territories; armies still encounter mountains; ports still matter; island chains still structure maritime power. Thus, geopolitics remains relevant not because geography is destiny, but because geography is persistent.

1.2.2 Geostrategic Location of Iran in West Asia

Iran's geostrategic location is one of the most consequential in the world. It occupies the Iranian plateau, bordered by the Caspian Sea to the north, the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman to the south, Iraq and Turkey to the west, and Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east. It lies at the intersection of West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and the Caucasus. Few states possess such a combination of maritime access, continental depth, energy resources, civilizational identity and regional influence. Iran's geography gives it both opportunity and vulnerability: opportunity because it can connect regions; vulnerability because it is exposed to rivalries from multiple directions. Iran's southern geography is especially critical. Its coastline along the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman places it near one of the world's most vital energy

corridors. The Strait of Hormuz, located between Iran and Oman, connects the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. It is a chokepoint of extraordinary importance because large volumes of crude oil, petroleum products and liquefied natural gas pass through it. The strategic meaning of Hormuz is simple: any instability there can affect global energy prices, shipping insurance, naval deployments and economic security far beyond West Asia. Iran's proximity to this chokepoint gives it geopolitical salience disproportionate to ordinary territorial measurement. Iran's northern orientation is equally significant. Its connection to the Caspian Sea places it within a resource-rich and strategically sensitive region involving Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. The Caspian basin is important for energy, transport, fisheries, security and Eurasian connectivity. Iran's northern geography also connects it to the Caucasus and Central Asia, regions that have become increasingly important in the post-Soviet geopolitical order. Through these routes, Iran can serve as a corridor between the Indian Ocean and Eurasia. This is why the INSTC and related connectivity projects are strategically significant.

Iran's eastern frontier connects it to Afghanistan and Pakistan. This geography is of direct relevance to India. Afghanistan has long been a theatre of regional contestation, and India's lack of direct land access to Afghanistan through Pakistan makes Iran's eastern and south-eastern corridors extremely valuable. Chabahar Port in south-eastern Iran provides India with a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that bypasses Pakistan. From a geopolitical perspective, Chabahar is not merely a commercial port; it is a spatial solution to a strategic obstruction. Iran's western frontier connects it to Iraq and Turkey, and through them to the Levant and the Mediterranean world. This gives Iran influence in Arab politics and access to broader West Asian theatres. Iran's cultural, religious and political links with Shia communities and movements across the region further extend its influence beyond its borders. Thus, Iran's geopolitics is not only territorial; it is also ideological, sectarian, civilizational and network-based. Its power projection includes diplomacy, energy, religious networks, allied non-state actors, trade routes and strategic depth. The mountainous character of Iran's terrain has historically contributed to its political resilience. The Zagros and Alborz mountain systems, deserts and plateau formations have given Iran a strong sense of territorial defensibility and civilizational continuity. Unlike flat and easily penetrable territories, Iran's geography has often made external

domination difficult and expensive. This has shaped Iranian strategic culture: a strong emphasis on sovereignty, self-reliance, resistance to encirclement and suspicion of foreign intervention. Geography, therefore, has not only influenced Iran's external policy; it has also shaped its national psychology.

For India, Iran's geostrategic location creates multiple policy implications. First, Iran is a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Second, it is a major factor in Gulf security and energy flows. Third, it is a bridge between the Indian Ocean and Eurasia. Fourth, it is a civilizational state with influence in Islamic and Persianate worlds. Fifth, it is a country whose stability or instability can affect India's diaspora, energy imports, maritime trade and regional diplomacy. Therefore, Iran's location in West Asia makes it indispensable to any serious Indian strategic assessment.

1.2.3 India's Strategic Location in the Indian Ocean Region

India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region is one of the foundational facts of its foreign policy and national security. The Indian peninsula projects deep into the Indian Ocean, with the Arabian Sea to the west, the Bay of Bengal to the east, and the wider oceanic space connecting Africa, West Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Australia. India's island territories, especially the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep, extend its maritime reach and enhance its surveillance, connectivity and security potential. This geography makes India not merely a continental state but a maritime civilization and an oceanic power. The Indian Ocean is one of the great arteries of global commerce. It carries energy flows from the Persian Gulf to East Asia, bulk cargo across the Global South, container traffic between Europe and Asia, and naval movement among major powers. Its chokepoints—Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, Malacca, Lombok, Sunda and the approaches to the Suez route—are central to international trade and energy security. India sits near the centre of this maritime system. This gives India both opportunity and responsibility. It can benefit from maritime trade, but it must also secure sea lines of communication, protect coastal infrastructure, safeguard island territories, and contribute to regional stability.

India's western seaboard connects it directly to the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf and East Africa. This is where India's relationship with Iran acquires maritime significance. Chabahar is accessible from India's western coast, and the route between Indian ports and Iranian ports is part of the larger Arabian Sea strategic space. India's energy imports from West Asia,

its trade with Gulf states, its diaspora links, and its naval presence all depend upon the security of this maritime theatre. Thus, India–Iran relations are not only continental through Afghanistan and Central Asia; they are also maritime through the Arabian Sea and Gulf approaches. India's eastern seaboard connects it to Southeast Asia and the Pacific through the Bay of Bengal and the Malacca Strait. This gives India a dual maritime orientation: westward toward the Gulf, Africa and Europe; eastward toward ASEAN, the South China Sea and the wider Indo-Pacific. India's strategic location therefore enables it to act as a bridge between West Asia and East Asia. In this larger maritime geography, Iran is important on the western flank, while Southeast Asia is important on the eastern flank. India's ability to manage both theatres is central to its rise as a major power. The strategic significance of India's location is reflected in policy concepts such as SAGAR—Security and Growth for All in the Region—and the later expansion of maritime thinking toward the Indo-Pacific and MAHASAGAR. These concepts express India's aspiration to be a net security provider, first responder, capacity builder and cooperative maritime partner in the Indian Ocean Region. They also reflect a shift from older continental anxieties toward a more balanced continental-maritime outlook. India cannot neglect its land borders, but it increasingly recognizes that its economic prosperity and strategic influence are inseparable from the ocean.

India's maritime position also affects its energy security. A large portion of India's energy supplies moves across the Indian Ocean and through West Asian chokepoints. Any crisis in the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb or Suez-linked routes can affect India's economy. Therefore, maritime domain awareness, naval preparedness, port infrastructure, strategic petroleum reserves, energy diversification and diplomatic engagement with Gulf and West Asian states become essential components of national security. In this context, relations with Iran are part of India's broader maritime-energy calculus. The Indian Ocean Region is also a theatre of major-power competition. The growing presence of external navies, infrastructure projects, military facilities, debt-linked port politics, piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, climate vulnerability and maritime disputes have made the region strategically sensitive. India's central location gives it natural advantages, but advantages require capability. Geography provides the position; policy must provide the instruments. Naval modernization, coastal security, island development, blue economy initiatives, connectivity diplomacy and

partnerships with littoral states are necessary to translate location into influence.

India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region, therefore, is central to the study of India–Iran relations. Iran opens India's westward continental and maritime options; India's oceanic position gives Iran access to a major Asian partner and the wider Indo-Pacific economy. The two countries are situated at opposite ends of a strategic arc connecting the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia. Their relationship becomes meaningful precisely because their geographies are complementary. India is the oceanic gateway; Iran is the continental hinge. Together, they occupy a corridor of immense civilizational memory and geopolitical consequence.

1.3 Contemporary Evolution of India–Iran Relations

India–Iran relations in the contemporary period represent a refined synthesis of *civilizational intimacy*, *strategic prudence*, *geo-economic necessity*, *regional diplomacy* and *autonomous foreign-policy conduct*. The relationship cannot be understood as a simple bilateral engagement between two Asian states; rather, it must be conceptualized as a historically deep and geopolitically layered partnership shaped by the changing configuration of *South Asia*, *West Asia*, *Central Asia*, the *Persian Gulf*, the *Indian Ocean Region* and the wider *Eurasian landmass*. Since 1947, both India and Iran have moved through different political systems, ideological climates, security anxieties and external alignments, yet the underlying strategic logic of the relationship has remained resilient. India requires Iran for energy diversification, access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, maritime connectivity through Chabahar, and diplomatic equilibrium in West Asia. Iran, in turn, views India as a major Asian civilization, a large market, a technologically capable partner, and a state whose foreign policy is not wholly subordinate to any single great-power bloc.

The contemporary relationship is marked by both *continuity* and *constraint*. Continuity arises from historical memory, formal diplomatic recognition, regular political exchanges, cultural linkages, commercial complementarities and shared interest in regional stability. Constraint arises from sanctions, external pressure, Iran's tense relations with the United States and Israel, India's expanding partnerships with the United States, Israel and the Gulf

Arab states, the Afghanistan question, Pakistan's geographical obstruction, and periodic divergence on sensitive political issues. This mixture makes India–Iran relations an instructive example of *complex diplomacy*, where cooperation proceeds not through romantic idealism but through calibrated engagement, issue-based convergence and strategic patience.

1.3.1 India–Iran Relations From 1947 to the Present

India's independence in 1947 and the emergence of the Republic of India as a sovereign state marked the beginning of a new diplomatic phase in India–Iran relations. Although the cultural contact between the Indian subcontinent and the Iranian plateau was ancient, the post-1947 relationship had to be institutionalized within the framework of modern state sovereignty. The signing of the *Treaty of Friendship* on 15 March 1950 provided the formal diplomatic foundation for the relationship. This treaty symbolized mutual recognition, sovereign equality and peaceful engagement. However, the early decades of the relationship were shaped by the *Cold War architecture*, and the two countries found themselves positioned within different strategic environments. India adopted *non-alignment* as a normative and strategic doctrine, while Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became closely associated with the Western security structure, including American influence in the Persian Gulf. Thus, the initial post-independence relationship contained cordiality, but not deep strategic convergence.

During the 1950s and 1960s, India's engagement with Iran was marked by diplomatic courtesy, civilizational goodwill and cautious political interaction. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's worldview, as reflected in *The Discovery of India*, emphasized the historical interconnection of Asian civilizations and the cultural depth of India's relations with Persia. Yet, realpolitik imposed its own limitations. Iran's alignment with Western powers and India's refusal to join military blocs produced a certain strategic distance. Moreover, Pakistan's membership in Western-sponsored security arrangements and Iran's historical closeness to Pakistan created further complications for India. Nevertheless, India did not reduce Iran to the status of a hostile camp member. New Delhi's diplomacy retained a long-range view: Iran's geography, oil resources, Persian Gulf location and civilizational prestige made it too important to be ignored.

The 1970s brought a gradual warming of relations, partly because India's regional stature increased after the 1971 Bangladesh War and partly because

Iran, flush with oil revenues, became an ambitious regional power under the Shah. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit to Iran in 1974 and the Shah's visit to India in 1978 reflected the willingness of both sides to expand contact despite structural differences. This phase may be described as one of *measured rapprochement*. India was interested in energy supplies and West Asian stability; Iran was interested in broader Asian recognition and economic engagement. However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution transformed Iran's internal political order and external orientation. The monarchy was replaced by an Islamic Republic, and Iran's foreign policy became more explicitly anti-Western, revolutionary and resistant to external domination.

India's response to the Islamic Revolution was pragmatic and restrained. New Delhi neither celebrated nor condemned the revolution in ideological terms. Instead, it accepted the new political reality and maintained diplomatic relations. This was consistent with India's traditional principle of *non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states*. During the Iran–Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, India adopted a careful position. Iraq had been a friendly country for India, and Iran was also historically and strategically important. India avoided excessive identification with either belligerent and sought to protect its energy, diaspora and maritime interests in the Gulf. This period revealed the essential character of Indian diplomacy: *prudence over polemics, engagement over estrangement, and balance over bloc alignment*.

The 1990s constituted a significant turning point. The end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India's economic liberalization, and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan created new grounds for India–Iran convergence. With the emergence of the Taliban, both India and Iran became concerned about religious extremism, Pakistan-backed strategic designs, and the destabilization of Afghanistan. Iran, a Shia-majority state, viewed the Taliban's sectarian radicalism with grave suspicion; India saw the Taliban regime as linked to Pakistan's strategic depth policy and hostile to India's interests. Both countries supported forces opposed to the Taliban, especially elements associated with the Northern Alliance. Afghanistan thus became a theatre of *strategic convergence* between New Delhi and Tehran.

The post-Cold War period also increased India's interest in Iran as a gateway to Central Asia. After 1947, India lost direct land connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia because Pakistan stood between India and the northwest. Iran offered a *geographical alternative* to this strategic blockage. The idea of

using Iranian territory and ports to reach Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia gained increasing importance. This was the beginning of a connectivity-oriented phase in India–Iran relations. The relationship began moving beyond ceremonial diplomacy toward *energy security, continental access, transport corridors* and *regional balancing*.

A major diplomatic acceleration occurred in the early twenty-first century. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Iran in 2001 and the signing of the *Tehran Declaration* gave the relationship a new strategic vocabulary. The visit of Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami to India in 2003 and the signing of the *New Delhi Declaration* further deepened the bilateral framework. President Khatami's presence as Chief Guest at India's Republic Day in 2003 carried considerable symbolic meaning. It signalled that India regarded Iran not as a peripheral actor but as a major civilizational and regional partner. During this period, India and Iran discussed energy, trade, technology, transportation, terrorism, regional stability and Afghanistan. The relationship moved from *historical cordiality* toward *structured strategic engagement*.

However, the same period also revealed the constraints imposed by the international system. Iran's nuclear programme became a major point of confrontation between Tehran and Western powers. India, which was negotiating its own civil nuclear understanding with the United States, had to manage a delicate diplomatic equation. New Delhi could not disregard Western concerns, but it also did not wish to rupture ties with Iran. India's votes at the International Atomic Energy Agency created discomfort in Tehran, yet the relationship did not collapse. This episode demonstrated that India–Iran relations are not immune to global pressure, but they possess enough strategic depth to survive episodic disagreement.

The 2010s introduced a more ambitious connectivity agenda. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016 produced the joint statement titled *Civilizational Connect, Contemporary Context*. The phrase itself was diplomatically meaningful: it connected the ancient Indo-Persian inheritance with the contemporary imperatives of trade, transport and regional stability. The signing of the Trilateral Agreement on Trade, Transport and Transit among India, Iran and Afghanistan gave concrete institutional shape to the Chabahar vision. Chabahar Port, especially the Shahid Beheshti terminal, emerged as the material symbol of India–Iran strategic cooperation. Unlike

ordinary port development, Chabahar represents a *geopolitical instrument of access*, enabling India to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan.

The visit of President Hassan Rouhani to India in 2018 and the joint statement *Towards Prosperity Through Greater Connectivity* further emphasized the centrality of connectivity in bilateral relations. At the same time, the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and the reimposition of sanctions on Iran created serious economic difficulties. India's oil imports from Iran declined sharply and then stopped under American pressure after the end of sanctions waivers in 2019. This development demonstrated the vulnerability of India–Iran economic relations to *extra-regional coercive frameworks*. Nevertheless, India continued to support the Chabahar project because it served not only bilateral commerce but also Afghanistan's humanitarian and developmental access.

The 2020s have been characterized by renewed engagement under difficult circumstances. India's External Affairs Minister visited Iran, Iranian ministers visited India, and both sides continued mechanisms such as Foreign Office Consultations, Joint Commission Meetings, security consultations and consular dialogues. The long-term main contract signed in May 2024 for the development of the Shahid Beheshti Port Terminal at Chabahar marked an important institutional consolidation. The 2025 Joint Commission Meeting, co-chaired by the foreign ministers of the two countries in New Delhi, indicated that despite sanctions, regional turbulence and external pressure, both governments remained committed to expanding cooperation in commerce, transport, infrastructure, multilateral forums and regional stability. Thus, from 1947 to the present, India–Iran relations have travelled through *Cold War caution, post-revolution adjustment, Afghanistan-based convergence, energy interdependence, sanctions-induced contraction and connectivity-centred renewal*.

1.3.2 Diplomatic, Economic, Security and Cultural Dimensions

The diplomatic dimension of India–Iran relations rests upon regular political communication, institutionalized mechanisms and a shared commitment to maintaining engagement despite external volatility. Formal diplomatic relations began in the early years of Indian independence, and over the decades high-level visits by prime ministers, presidents, foreign ministers, speakers of parliament, vice presidents and sectoral ministers created a dense

network of political contact. The diplomatic architecture includes the Joint Commission Meeting, Foreign Office Consultations, Security Consultations, Joint Consular Committee meetings and working groups on various sectors. Such mechanisms are important because they prevent the relationship from becoming dependent only on summit-level symbolism. They provide administrative continuity, bureaucratic memory and issue-specific problem solving.

Diplomatically, India and Iran have often operated within the doctrine of *strategic autonomy*. India has cultivated relations with Iran while simultaneously deepening ties with the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf states. Iran, similarly, has engaged India while expanding relations with China, Russia, Iraq, Syria, Central Asian states and regional organizations. This does not make the relationship weak; rather, it makes it sophisticated. India–Iran diplomacy is based on the recognition that in a multipolar and conflict-prone region, absolute alignment is neither possible nor desirable. The relationship survives because both sides understand the utility of *issue-based convergence* and *civilized disagreement*.

The economic dimension has historically been dominated by energy, trade and connectivity. Iran's large oil and gas reserves made it a valuable energy partner for India, whose expanding economy requires diversified and secure energy supplies. For many years, Iranian crude oil was important for Indian refiners because of favourable terms and geographic proximity. Sanctions disrupted this pattern, but the structural complementarity remains evident. India needs reliable energy sources; Iran needs stable markets and investment partners. Beyond hydrocarbons, bilateral trade includes Indian exports such as rice, tea, sugar, pharmaceuticals, electrical machinery, man-made fibres and other commodities, while Indian imports from Iran have included dry fruits, chemicals, glassware, methanol, petroleum bitumen, dates and other items.

However, India–Iran economic relations remain below their potential because of sanctions, payment restrictions, banking constraints, insurance difficulties, shipping limitations and uncertainty among private investors. The decline in oil imports after 2019 reduced the scale of bilateral trade. Yet the relationship has not been economically extinguished because non-oil trade, pharmaceuticals, agriculture-related commodities, food products, infrastructure and connectivity continue to provide avenues of cooperation.

Economic diplomacy between India and Iran therefore requires *financial creativity, sanctions-sensitive compliance, public-sector leadership* and *long-term strategic patience*.

Connectivity is the most significant geoeconomic dimension of the relationship. Chabahar Port is the centrepiece of this dimension. From India's perspective, Chabahar performs several functions simultaneously: it provides access to Afghanistan, offers a route toward Central Asia, complements the International North–South Transport Corridor, counters the geographical limitation created by Pakistan's denial of transit, and strengthens India's role in Eurasian connectivity. From Iran's perspective, Chabahar promotes the development of its south-eastern region, enhances Iran's maritime importance in the Gulf of Oman, attracts Indian investment and expands Iran's role as a transit state. The port is thus a *geoeconomic hinge* between the Indian Ocean and Eurasia.

The International North–South Transport Corridor adds a wider regional dimension. The INSTC links India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through multimodal sea, rail and road connectivity. In the language of geopolitics, it is an *alternative corridor of strategic mobility*. It reduces dependence on traditional routes and creates new possibilities for trade between South Asia and Eurasia. For India, the INSTC helps transform Iran from an energy partner into a transit partner. For Iran, it strengthens the country's ambition to become an indispensable connector between the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, Russia and the Indian Ocean.

The security dimension of India–Iran relations is complex, cautious and largely region-oriented. It does not resemble a military alliance; rather, it is based on shared concerns about terrorism, extremism, narcotics trafficking, maritime security, Afghanistan's instability and the security of trade corridors. During the Taliban's first regime in the 1990s, India and Iran shared apprehensions regarding extremist forces in Afghanistan. After 2001, both supported Afghanistan's reconstruction and stability, although their approaches were shaped by different regional calculations. After the Taliban's return to power in 2021, India and Iran again faced the challenge of dealing with a changed Afghan reality through pragmatic engagement and careful monitoring.

Security cooperation also includes maritime and consular concerns. The Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea are vital to India's energy

supply, shipping routes and diaspora safety. Any escalation involving Iran can directly affect Indian nationals, oil prices, maritime insurance and sea-lane security. Therefore, India has a strong interest in de-escalation, freedom of navigation, energy stability and peaceful resolution of disputes in the Gulf. Iran, as a littoral power near the Strait of Hormuz, is central to this equation. India's diplomacy toward Iran is therefore linked with its wider maritime doctrine and Indian Ocean strategy.

The cultural dimension is the oldest and perhaps the most emotionally durable element of India–Iran relations. Persian language, literature, art, architecture, historiography, Sufism, music, cuisine and courtly manners left a deep imprint on Indian civilization. Medieval and early modern India produced a magnificent Indo-Persian world in which Persian was not merely a court language but a vehicle of administration, aesthetics, ethics and intellectual refinement. Works of Saadi, Hafez, Rumi and Jami circulated in Indian scholarly and spiritual circles, while Indian texts, sciences and narratives moved into Persianate and Islamic intellectual worlds. In this sense, India–Iran cultural relations are not decorative; they are constitutive of a major part of India's historical personality.

The Parsi community in India represents another living civilizational bridge. Descended from Zoroastrians who migrated from Iran to India, the Parsis became one of India's most distinguished communities, contributing to industry, education, philanthropy, law, science, defence, public life and culture. Their history symbolizes India's plural civilizational ethos and Iran's enduring cultural presence in the subcontinent. This human bridge gives India–Iran relations a rare emotional depth that cannot be manufactured by contemporary diplomacy alone.

Cultural diplomacy today includes academic exchanges, Persian studies, Indian cultural centres, tourism, films, language learning, scholarships and civilizational conferences. The Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Tehran represents India's effort to institutionalize cultural engagement. Iranian students in India, Indian visitors to Iran, yoga, cinema, literature, and shared interest in heritage sites contribute to *people-to-people diplomacy*. Cultural relations soften political differences and provide a reservoir of trust during difficult times. They remind both countries that state interests may fluctuate, but civilizational memory endures.

Thus, the diplomatic, economic, security and cultural dimensions of India–Iran relations form an integrated matrix. Diplomacy provides the channel, economy provides the material incentive, security provides the strategic urgency, and culture provides the emotional legitimacy. When any one dimension weakens, the others help sustain the relationship. This multidimensionality is the principal reason why India–Iran relations have remained resilient despite sanctions, regional conflicts and external pressure.

1.3.3 Regional and Global Factors Affecting Bilateral Relations

India–Iran relations are profoundly shaped by regional and global factors because both countries are located in strategically sensitive regions. Iran is situated at the intersection of West Asia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf and South Asia; India stands at the centre of the Indian Ocean and at the heart of South Asia. Their bilateral relationship is therefore constantly influenced by developments beyond their borders. The first major factor is the *United States–Iran conflict*. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran’s relations with the United States have remained adversarial, marked by sanctions, diplomatic estrangement, nuclear disputes, regional proxy conflicts and periodic military tension. India, which has developed a strong strategic partnership with the United States, must carefully manage this contradiction. New Delhi cannot disregard American sanctions, but it also cannot ignore Iran’s geographical importance. This produces a delicate diplomacy of *calibrated engagement*.

The second major factor is the Iranian nuclear question and sanctions regime. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 briefly opened the possibility of Iran’s reintegration into global economic networks, but the United States’ withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 and the reimposition of sanctions severely affected India–Iran economic cooperation. Oil imports, banking channels, insurance facilities, shipping arrangements and investment commitments became difficult. This demonstrates that bilateral goodwill alone cannot overcome the architecture of global financial power. Sanctions operate not only as legal restrictions but also as psychological deterrents for banks, companies and investors. Consequently, India–Iran cooperation often proceeds through cautious, government-backed and strategically justified projects rather than large-scale private-sector expansion.

The third factor is Afghanistan. Afghanistan has historically been the land bridge between South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. For India,

Afghanistan represents security, connectivity, development partnership and access to Eurasia. For Iran, Afghanistan is a neighbouring country with implications for border security, refugees, water rights, narcotics, trade and sectarian politics. Both India and Iran have an interest in Afghanistan not becoming a sanctuary for terrorism or extremist destabilization. Chabahar's importance increased precisely because Afghanistan needed alternative access to the sea and India needed a route that bypassed Pakistan. After the Taliban's return in 2021, both India and Iran had to adjust to a new political reality through pragmatic, cautious and interest-based engagement.

The fourth factor is Pakistan. Pakistan's geography lies between India and Afghanistan, thereby obstructing India's direct continental access to Central Asia. This has made Iran indispensable for India's westward connectivity. Chabahar is strategically significant because it reduces India's dependence on Pakistan-controlled transit routes. At the same time, Iran has its own complex relations with Pakistan, involving border security, sectarian issues, trade and regional diplomacy. India–Iran relations are therefore indirectly shaped by the Pakistan factor, not necessarily through open rivalry but through the geography of access and denial. In geopolitical terms, Iran offers India a *strategic bypass* to the north-western continental space.

The fifth factor is the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. The Persian Gulf is one of the world's most critical energy zones, and the Strait of Hormuz is among the most vital maritime chokepoints. India's energy security, shipping, diaspora welfare and trade are deeply tied to Gulf stability. Any crisis involving Iran, whether with the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia or other regional actors, can affect oil prices and maritime movement. Therefore, India has consistently preferred de-escalation, dialogue and restraint in the Gulf. For India, Iran is not only a bilateral partner but also a key variable in the security of the western Indian Ocean and the energy routes leading to India's ports.

The sixth factor is the changing balance of power in West Asia. India's West Asia policy requires a sophisticated equilibrium among Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Iraq, Israel and Palestine. India has deep energy and diaspora ties with the Gulf Arab monarchies; it has strong defence, technology and agricultural cooperation with Israel; it has civilizational and strategic interests with Iran; and it supports a negotiated settlement of the Palestinian issue. This complex regional environment

demands *multi-vector diplomacy*. India cannot afford exclusivist alignments in West Asia. Its approach toward Iran must therefore be coordinated with its broader regional balancing strategy.

The seventh factor is China's expanding role. China has developed a strong relationship with Iran, including energy cooperation, infrastructure diplomacy and strategic engagement. China's Belt and Road Initiative, its partnership with Pakistan through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, and its interest in ports and corridors across Eurasia affect India's calculations. India's investment in Chabahar is sometimes analyzed in relation to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which has Chinese involvement. Although Chabahar and Gwadar should not be reduced to simplistic rivalry, their geographical proximity and strategic symbolism cannot be ignored. For India, engagement with Iran helps prevent strategic marginalization in the western approaches of the Indian Ocean and Central Asia.

The eighth factor is Russia and Eurasian connectivity. Russia has long maintained relations with both India and Iran, and the INSTC provides a framework in which Indian, Iranian and Russian interests can converge. After disruptions in Eurasian trade routes and geopolitical shifts involving Russia and the West, alternative corridors have gained renewed relevance. Iran's geography gives it the ability to connect the Indian Ocean with the Caspian Sea and Russia. For India, this offers a route to Eurasia that is not dependent on Pakistan or exclusively on maritime routes through the Suez Canal. Thus, Russia and Eurasia form an important structural context for India–Iran relations.

The ninth factor is multilateral diplomacy. India and Iran interact in forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS-related platforms, the United Nations and other regional arrangements. Iran's admission into groupings such as SCO and BRICS-related engagements increases the number of diplomatic platforms where India and Iran can coordinate. Multilateral forums allow both countries to discuss regional stability, terrorism, connectivity, financial arrangements and global governance. Such platforms are important because they provide diplomatic space outside Western-dominated institutional structures.

The tenth factor is domestic politics and ideological perception. India is a secular democratic republic with a large Muslim population, including a significant Shia community. Iran is an Islamic Republic with a revolutionary

political identity and a strong sense of Persian civilizational exceptionalism. Periodic comments on domestic or religious issues can create diplomatic discomfort. Yet both sides have generally managed such moments through official restraint, clarification and continuation of dialogue. Mature diplomacy requires the ability to prevent rhetorical irritants from overwhelming structural interests. India–Iran relations demonstrate this principle repeatedly.

The eleventh factor is the global energy transition. As the world gradually moves toward renewable energy, green hydrogen, electric mobility and climate-conscious development, the traditional oil-centric basis of India–Iran economic relations may change. However, this does not make Iran irrelevant. Iran possesses hydrocarbon resources, mineral potential, transit geography and possible future relevance in energy corridors. India’s future engagement with Iran may therefore move from crude oil dependence toward a diversified matrix including connectivity, petrochemicals, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals, renewable energy, port development, logistics and regional trade.

The twelfth factor is the Indian Ocean and maritime security. India’s rise as a maritime power makes the western Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman strategically important. Iran’s coastline at the Gulf of Oman and its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz give it maritime relevance for India. Chabahar, unlike ports inside the Persian Gulf, opens toward the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, giving it logistical importance. India’s maritime doctrine, including the idea of *Security and Growth for All in the Region*, requires stable relations with littoral and near-littoral states. Iran is therefore part of India’s wider maritime imagination.

In sum, regional and global factors do not merely influence India–Iran relations; they constitute the environment in which the relationship operates. The bilateral relationship is shaped by *sanctions, energy security, Afghanistan, Pakistan’s geography, Gulf stability, China’s rise, Russia–Eurasia connectivity, multilateral institutions, domestic sensitivities, maritime security* and *global energy transition*. These factors create both opportunities and constraints. The diplomatic challenge for India and Iran is to convert geographical proximity and civilizational familiarity into durable cooperation while managing external pressures with prudence. The relationship’s future will depend not on sentimental invocation of the past

alone, but on the disciplined conversion of historical goodwill into *strategic resilience, economic practicality and regional statesmanship*.

1.4 Significance of India–Iran Relations

India–Iran relations possess a significance that transcends ordinary bilateralism. They represent a historically sanctified and strategically indispensable relationship between two civilizational states located at the intersection of *South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian region* and the *Indian Ocean*. The importance of this relationship does not arise from a single factor; it emerges from the cumulative force of geography, history, culture, energy, connectivity, maritime security, continental access, regional balance and diplomatic autonomy. India needs Iran not merely as a country of the Persian Gulf, but as a *geostrategic hinge* connecting the Indian Ocean to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. Iran needs India not merely as a large Asian market, but as a major civilizational power capable of providing diplomatic diversification, economic engagement and eastward strategic depth.

The significance of India–Iran relations must therefore be understood through three interrelated perspectives: first, their importance for Indian foreign policy; second, their importance for Iran’s Asian policy; and third, their importance for regional connectivity and security. These three perspectives reveal that the relationship is not accidental, sentimental or episodic; it is structurally embedded in the geopolitical realities of Asia. In the language of classical geopolitics, India and Iran occupy complementary positions: India is a major maritime power in the Indian Ocean, while Iran is a continental-maritime power at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and the gateway to Eurasia. Their cooperation is therefore a natural expression of *geographical complementarity* and *strategic necessity*.

1.4.1 Importance for Indian Foreign Policy

Iran holds an important place in Indian foreign policy because it enables India to pursue its larger diplomatic doctrine of *strategic autonomy*. Since independence, India has attempted to avoid subordination to rigid military blocs and great-power commands. In the contemporary period, this doctrine has evolved from non-alignment to *multi-alignment*, where India engages the United States, Russia, Europe, Israel, Arab Gulf states, Iran, ASEAN, Africa and the Indo-Pacific simultaneously, without surrendering its independent

assessment of national interest. Iran is a crucial test case of this approach. India's relations with Iran continue despite American sanctions, Iran–Israel hostility, Gulf rivalries and Western pressure. This does not mean that India ignores international constraints; rather, it means that India carefully preserves diplomatic space for a relationship that serves long-term national interests.

For Indian foreign policy, Iran is essential because it offers access to India's extended neighbourhood. India's immediate neighbourhood is geographically constrained by Pakistan's refusal to provide overland transit to Afghanistan and Central Asia. This strategic blockage has historically limited India's continental outreach. Iran provides an alternative route through Chabahar Port, Iranian road and rail networks, and onward links to Afghanistan and Central Asia. In this sense, Iran becomes India's *western gateway* and a practical answer to the geopolitical problem created by Partition. Geography has denied India direct land access to the northwest; diplomacy with Iran restores that access through maritime-continent integration.

Iran is also important for India's *Connect Central Asia Policy*. Central Asia is rich in energy, minerals, strategic location and civilizational memory, yet India's access to the region has remained limited by geography. Iran's location makes it a possible corridor between Indian ports and Central Asian markets. Chabahar and the International North–South Transport Corridor create a framework through which India can link Mumbai, Kandla or other western ports with Iranian ports, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe. Thus, Iran helps India transform from a primarily South Asian actor into a more expansive Eurasian participant.

Energy security is another major reason for Iran's importance in Indian foreign policy. India is one of the world's largest energy-consuming economies, and its developmental trajectory depends upon secure, affordable and diversified energy supplies. Iran, possessing vast oil and gas reserves, has historically been a significant energy partner for India. Although sanctions have constrained crude oil imports and payment mechanisms, the underlying complementarity remains intact. India's long-term energy diplomacy requires diversification, and Iran remains a natural partner because of geographical proximity, resource abundance and historical trade experience. Even when direct oil trade declines, Iran remains significant for discussions on

petrochemicals, fertilizers, gas, energy infrastructure and future regional energy corridors.

Iran also matters for India's West Asia policy. India has vital interests in West Asia: energy imports, maritime trade, a large Indian diaspora, remittances, counter-terrorism cooperation, food security links, religious travel, and partnerships with Gulf states, Israel and Iran. Indian diplomacy in West Asia is marked by *equidistant engagement* rather than sectarian alignment. India maintains strong relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Israel and Iran simultaneously. This balancing requires diplomatic finesse because these actors often have conflicting interests. Iran's inclusion in India's West Asian policy prevents India from being perceived as dependent on one regional camp and strengthens New Delhi's image as an autonomous, mature and civilizational confident actor.

Iran is also important for India's Afghanistan policy. Afghanistan has historically been central to India's security imagination, not only because of civilizational ties but also because instability in Afghanistan has repeatedly affected South Asian security. During the Taliban's first regime, India and Iran shared concerns about extremism and Pakistan-backed strategic designs. In the present context too, Afghanistan remains a crucial variable in India–Iran engagement. Iran's long border with Afghanistan, its influence among Afghan communities, its concern about refugees, water, narcotics and security, and its location as a transit route make it indispensable for any serious Indian approach to Afghanistan. Through Iran, India can continue humanitarian, developmental and commercial engagement with Afghanistan even under difficult political circumstances.

From the maritime perspective, Iran strengthens India's western Indian Ocean strategy. India's western seaboard faces the Arabian Sea and connects to the Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf and East Africa. Chabahar, located on Iran's south-eastern coast along the Gulf of Oman, lies outside the narrow interior of the Persian Gulf and opens toward the Arabian Sea. This gives it special logistical and strategic relevance. For India, Chabahar is not merely a port; it is a *maritime aperture* through which India can project commercial access into the continental interior of Asia. It also complements India's broader maritime vision of secure sea lanes, stable chokepoints and cooperative regional development.

Iran's significance for Indian foreign policy is also visible in the context of China's expanding footprint. China's Belt and Road Initiative, its close strategic partnership with Pakistan, and its involvement in Gwadar Port have intensified India's need for alternative connectivity arrangements. Chabahar is often discussed in relation to Gwadar because both ports are located in the wider Arabian Sea–Gulf of Oman theatre. Although India's Chabahar policy should not be reduced to a simplistic anti-China or anti-Pakistan project, it undeniably provides India with strategic space in a region where China and Pakistan have attempted to shape connectivity in ways that may constrain India. Iran thus helps India avoid geopolitical marginalization in the western approaches to the Indian Ocean and Central Asia.

Iran is further important because it supports India's aspiration for a multipolar Asian order. India's foreign policy increasingly seeks a world in which power is not concentrated in a single centre and where Asian civilizations have the freedom to pursue independent developmental and strategic pathways. Iran, despite its controversies and constraints, is also a state that resists external domination and values sovereign autonomy. This shared sensitivity to independence creates a basis for dialogue. India does not necessarily endorse all Iranian policies, and Iran does not automatically support all Indian positions; nevertheless, both understand the value of autonomy in an unequal international system.

In cultural diplomacy, Iran strengthens India's civilizational outreach. Persian language, Sufi thought, Indo-Persian literature, Mughal architecture, miniature painting, courtly traditions and the Parsi community form part of India's historical personality. Engagement with Iran allows India to project not merely material power but *civilizational diplomacy*. This is important because India's rise is not simply economic or military; it is also cultural and normative. A foreign policy that remembers India's Persianate heritage becomes richer, deeper and more historically self-aware.

Thus, Iran's importance for Indian foreign policy is multidimensional. It serves India's strategic autonomy, energy security, Afghanistan policy, Central Asian outreach, West Asian balance, maritime strategy, Eurasian connectivity, China–Pakistan counterweight, civilizational diplomacy and multipolar worldview. In the refined vocabulary of statecraft, Iran is not an optional partner for India; it is a *strategic necessity conditioned by geography and legitimized by history*.

1.4.2 Importance for Iran's Asian Policy

India is equally significant for Iran's Asian policy. Iran's foreign policy has long been shaped by its search for sovereignty, regime security, economic survival, regional influence and resistance to external pressure. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran's relations with the West, especially the United States, have remained tense. Sanctions, financial restrictions, diplomatic isolation and military pressure have encouraged Iran to look toward Asia for economic and strategic alternatives. This orientation is often described as Iran's *Look East Policy* or *Asian orientation*. In this policy, China and Russia occupy prominent positions, but India remains a uniquely valuable partner because of its civilizational depth, market size, technological capacity, maritime location and tradition of independent diplomacy.

For Iran, India represents a major Asian power that does not approach Iran only through the prism of hostility, sanctions or ideological suspicion. India's engagement is pragmatic, historically informed and cautious. This gives Iran a relationship with a large democracy that maintains dialogue even during difficult international circumstances. Iran values such engagement because it reduces excessive dependence on any single partner. If Iran's Asian policy were confined only to China and Russia, Tehran could risk becoming strategically over-dependent. India provides a more diversified Asian option, enabling Iran to cultivate a broader diplomatic portfolio.

India is important for Iran's economy because of its large market and long-standing trade complementarities. Iran has energy resources, petrochemicals, dry fruits, minerals, strategic location and transit potential. India has demand for energy, food products, fertilizers, infrastructure cooperation, pharmaceuticals, technology, rice, tea, engineering goods and consumer markets. This complementarity gives the relationship natural economic substance. Sanctions have constrained the relationship, but they have not erased the logic of cooperation. For Iran, India offers not only trade but also credibility: Indian participation in infrastructure and connectivity projects can signal that Iran is not isolated from major Asian economies.

Iran's Asian policy also benefits from India's role in Chabahar. The development of Chabahar Port is not only advantageous for India; it is equally important for Iran. Chabahar is located in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, a region that has historically required greater development, investment and integration. Indian participation in the port helps Iran develop its south-

eastern maritime frontier and strengthens its position as a transit state. Chabahar allows Iran to project itself as a *logistical bridge* between the Indian Ocean, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia. In this sense, India contributes to Iran's aspiration to become a regional connectivity hub.

Iran's Asian policy also seeks to diversify its external economic channels under sanctions. Western financial restrictions have often limited Iran's ability to trade freely, receive investments and conduct banking transactions. Asian partners become important because they may be more willing to explore alternative payment arrangements, state-backed projects and sanctions-sensitive trade mechanisms. India, with its large public-sector institutions, diplomatic experience and cautious private sector, can cooperate with Iran in carefully selected areas where strategic value justifies administrative effort. Such cooperation may not always be fast, but it can be durable.

India is also important for Iran's access to the Indian Ocean economy. Although Iran has its own coastline, India's position in the Indian Ocean and its growing maritime partnerships make it a valuable partner for wider oceanic connectivity. The Indian Ocean links West Asia with East Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. By strengthening relations with India, Iran can connect more effectively with this maritime world. Chabahar, in particular, provides Iran with a southern opening toward the Arabian Sea and beyond. It complements Iran's traditional Persian Gulf orientation by giving it a broader oceanic outlook.

India's importance for Iran's Asian policy also has diplomatic value. India is a member of major multilateral platforms and has increasingly active roles in the United Nations, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS-related arrangements, G20 processes and Indo-Pacific dialogues. Iran's participation in Asian and Eurasian platforms can benefit from constructive engagement with India. Both countries can coordinate on issues such as connectivity, counter-terrorism, regional stability, multipolarity, development, cultural cooperation and reform of global governance. India's diplomatic stature gives Iran an Asian partner whose voice carries weight beyond the immediate region.

Iran also sees India as a civilizational interlocutor. Unlike many relationships based purely on oil, arms or ideological alliances, India–Iran relations possess cultural dignity. Persian influence in India, Indian intellectual influence in

Persian and Arabic worlds, Sufi networks, Zoroastrian migration and Indo-Persian literature create a deep emotional and symbolic foundation. For Iran, a country intensely conscious of its Persian civilizational identity, India is not just another Asian market; it is a civilization where Persianate culture achieved extraordinary refinement. This cultural recognition gives India a special place in Iran's external imagination.

In strategic terms, India helps Iran maintain balance in Asia. Iran's relations with China are significant, but China also has deep relations with Pakistan and growing stakes in the Gulf Arab world. Russia is important, but Russia's priorities are shaped by its own Eurasian and Western confrontations. India offers Iran a different kind of partner: large, independent, non-Western but not anti-Western in a rigid ideological sense; historically friendly but strategically cautious; economically promising but sanctions-sensitive. This makes India useful to Iran as part of a diversified Asian strategy.

India's role is also relevant to Iran's engagement with South Asia. Iran's relations with Pakistan are complex, involving border security, sectarian questions, trade and regional diplomacy. India's relationship gives Iran a balancing option in South Asia, though Tehran avoids turning India–Iran ties into overt anti-Pakistan alignment. Iran's diplomacy generally seeks flexibility among neighbours and major powers. India, therefore, helps Iran avoid dependence on Pakistan for South Asian outreach and gives Tehran access to a much larger regional and global actor.

For Iran's Asian policy, India also carries technological and developmental relevance. India's strengths in pharmaceuticals, information technology, education, medical services, engineering, agriculture and capacity building can be useful for Iran. Educational exchanges, medical tourism, student mobility, cultural institutions and professional linkages add human depth to the relationship. These are not spectacular geopolitical instruments, but they create long-term goodwill and societal connections.

Thus, India is important for Iran's Asian policy because it offers *economic diversification, civilizational recognition, maritime access, connectivity partnership, strategic balance, multilateral cooperation and diplomatic legitimacy*. In Iran's eastward orientation, India is not merely one Asian country among many; it is a historically connected and geopolitically valuable partner whose cooperation can help Iran reduce isolation, develop Chabahar, engage the Indian Ocean and strengthen its Eurasian ambitions.

1.4.3 Importance for Regional Connectivity and Security

The most concrete contemporary significance of India–Iran relations lies in regional connectivity and security. Connectivity has become one of the central languages of twenty-first-century geopolitics. Ports, roads, railways, corridors, pipelines, digital networks and trade routes are no longer merely economic infrastructure; they are instruments of influence, resilience and strategic autonomy. India–Iran cooperation in Chabahar and the International North–South Transport Corridor demonstrates how bilateral relations can produce regional consequences. The relationship is therefore not confined to New Delhi and Tehran; it affects Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the wider Eurasian trade system.

Chabahar Port is the most visible symbol of India–Iran connectivity cooperation. Located on Iran’s south-eastern coast along the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar provides India with maritime access to Iran and onward continental access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its significance lies in its ability to bypass Pakistan, which has denied India direct transit to Afghanistan. For India, Chabahar is a *strategic bypass*, a *commercial gateway* and a *diplomatic instrument of regional outreach*. For Iran, it is a development project, a transit asset and a means of enhancing the economic importance of its south-eastern region. For Afghanistan and Central Asia, it offers an alternative route to the sea.

Chabahar’s importance is not limited to trade volume. Its deeper value lies in *strategic optionality*. In geopolitics, the existence of alternative routes reduces vulnerability. A country dependent on a single route can be pressured, delayed or denied access. Chabahar gives India and regional partners another route. It reduces the monopoly of Pakistan-controlled transit pathways and creates a more plural geography of movement. Such alternative connectivity is especially important in a region where borders, rivalries and sanctions often disrupt normal trade.

The International North–South Transport Corridor enhances this logic on a larger scale. The INSTC envisions multimodal connectivity linking India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through sea, road and rail networks. It can reduce transit time, diversify trade routes and connect the Indian Ocean with Eurasia. In geopolitical terms, the INSTC transforms Iran into a *corridor state* and India into a more active Eurasian participant. It also

creates possibilities for trade with Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Central Asia and Europe. The corridor is significant because it offers an alternative to longer and vulnerable routes through the Suez Canal and traditional maritime pathways.

Regional connectivity through India and Iran also has implications for Afghanistan's stability. Afghanistan's landlocked geography makes it dependent on transit routes. Historically, dependence on Pakistan has created economic and political vulnerability for Afghanistan. Chabahar offers Afghanistan an alternative outlet. During earlier phases, India used Chabahar to send wheat and humanitarian supplies to Afghanistan. Such examples show that connectivity is not merely commercial; it is also humanitarian and developmental. A landlocked country with multiple access routes is better positioned to resist coercive pressure and sustain economic activity.

Central Asia is another major beneficiary of India–Iran connectivity. The Central Asian republics are rich in energy, minerals and strategic location, but they are landlocked and dependent on transit corridors through neighbouring states. India has historical, cultural and strategic interest in Central Asia, but physical access remains difficult. Iran provides the missing link. Through Chabahar, Iranian territory and the INSTC, India can develop more practical connections with Central Asian markets. This is essential for India's long-term Eurasian policy and for Central Asia's diversification of external partnerships.

Connectivity and security are deeply intertwined. Secure corridors require political stability, maritime safety, counter-terrorism cooperation, customs coordination, financial mechanisms and infrastructure protection. India–Iran cooperation therefore contributes to regional security by promoting functional interdependence. When states invest in shared routes, ports and trade mechanisms, they develop incentives to preserve stability. Connectivity can never eliminate conflict by itself, but it can create constituencies for peace and economic rationality.

The security dimension is especially important in relation to the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most critical energy chokepoints. Any disruption affects oil prices, shipping insurance, global inflation and energy-importing economies such as India. Iran's proximity to Hormuz gives it extraordinary geopolitical significance. India, dependent on stable maritime energy flows, has a profound interest in

preventing escalation in this region. Therefore, India–Iran relations contribute indirectly to India’s energy security and maritime risk management. Engagement with Iran enables India to communicate with a central actor in Gulf security.

Maritime security in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman also connects India and Iran. The western Indian Ocean has become increasingly important because of piracy, terrorism, arms trafficking, narcotics movement, illegal fishing, great-power naval presence and energy shipping. India’s naval and diplomatic policies seek a stable maritime environment. Iran’s coastline and ports are part of this environment. Even without a formal security alliance, India and Iran can discuss maritime safety, port security, anti-narcotics cooperation and consular issues. Such practical security cooperation strengthens regional stability.

Counter-terrorism is another area of shared concern. India has suffered from cross-border terrorism and extremist violence; Iran has faced terrorism, insurgency and border insecurity, particularly in its eastern regions. Both countries have reasons to oppose extremist networks that destabilize Afghanistan, Central Asia and South Asia. During the Taliban’s first regime, this convergence was more visible. In the present period, the challenge is more complex because regional actors have adjusted to the Taliban’s return. Nevertheless, India and Iran continue to share an interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary for transnational terrorism.

Narcotics trafficking is also an important security issue. Afghanistan has historically been a major source of opium production, and trafficking routes pass through Iran and other regional states. Iran has borne heavy security and social costs in combating narcotics trafficking. India too faces concerns related to drug smuggling through maritime and land routes. Cooperation between India and Iran in this field can contribute to regional human security. Such issues remind us that security is not limited to armies and borders; it includes social stability, health, crime prevention and institutional cooperation.

Regional connectivity and security also have a diplomatic dimension. India–Iran cooperation provides an example of *inclusive regionalism*, where infrastructure is not intended only for bilateral gain but for wider regional utility. Chabahar can serve Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond. INSTC can serve India, Iran, Russia, the Caucasus and Europe. Such projects are

different from narrow geopolitical containment because they create shared commercial possibilities. Their success depends on openness, predictability, sovereignty-respecting cooperation and economic viability.

At the same time, regional connectivity faces serious challenges. Sanctions against Iran discourage banks, insurers and private investors. Political instability in Afghanistan creates uncertainty. Rival ports and corridors, including those associated with China and Pakistan, create competitive pressures. Infrastructural gaps inside Iran and along connecting routes require sustained investment. Customs procedures, rail connectivity, currency settlement and logistics efficiency remain practical hurdles. Therefore, the India–Iran connectivity agenda requires not only diplomatic declaration but administrative discipline, financial innovation and long-term commitment.

Security challenges are equally formidable. Iran’s tensions with the United States and Israel can disrupt the regional environment. Gulf rivalries can affect shipping and energy flows. Domestic instability inside regional states can interrupt infrastructure projects. Great-power competition can politicize corridors. India must therefore manage the relationship with caution. Its aim is not to enter regional conflicts but to preserve access, stability and communication. This is the essence of *prudent geopolitics*: to pursue strategic gains without inviting unnecessary entanglement.

The importance of India–Iran relations for regional connectivity and security ultimately lies in their capacity to reshape the geography of access. They can connect the Indian Ocean with Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia; they can provide alternatives to coercive transit dependence; they can strengthen maritime and continental resilience; and they can create a framework for regional cooperation in a fragmented geopolitical environment. Chabahar and the INSTC are not mere infrastructure projects; they are *cartographic revisions of strategic possibility*. They convert geography from a barrier into a bridge.

In conclusion, India–Iran relations are significant because they serve the fundamental interests of both countries and the wider region. For India, Iran is a gateway to West Asia, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia, and a pillar of strategic autonomy. For Iran, India is a major Asian partner, a civilizational interlocutor, an economic opportunity and a route to broader Asian engagement. For the region, their cooperation offers connectivity, security, diversification and stability. The relationship’s future will depend upon the

ability of both states to transform historical goodwill into institutionalized cooperation, to manage sanctions and regional crises with diplomatic maturity, and to pursue connectivity as an instrument of peace rather than domination. In this sense, India–Iran relations represent not only a bilateral partnership but a larger experiment in *Asian strategic resilience*.

Chapter 2:

Historical and Civilizational Background

The historical and civilizational background of India–Iran relations is not an ornamental preface to diplomatic history; it is the profound *civilizational substratum* upon which the entire edifice of contemporary bilateral understanding rests. India and Iran are not merely two modern nation-states separated by political frontiers and connected by formal embassies; they are two ancient cultural worlds whose interactions have unfolded across the vast theatre of *Asia's inner geography, maritime commerce, linguistic kinship, religious imagination, imperial contact, Persianate refinement, Sufi metaphysics, literary interpenetration and commercial mobility*. The relationship between the Indian subcontinent and the Iranian plateau is therefore best understood as a long historical continuum, not as a recent diplomatic invention.

The past of India and Iran may be visualized as a richly layered *civilizational palimpsest*. Each age wrote something upon this palimpsest: the ancient age contributed *Indo-Iranian linguistic affinity* and mythological resemblance; the Achaemenid period contributed political and commercial contact with north-western India; the Sassanian age contributed cultural and intellectual exchange; the Islamic period contributed Persian language, Sufi thought and artistic refinement; the medieval and Mughal periods produced the grand Indo-Persian synthesis; and the modern period converted this inherited intimacy into diplomatic cooperation. Thus, the history of India–Iran relations is not a history of intermittent encounters alone; it is a history of *mutual civilizational enrichment*.

The importance of this chapter lies in the fact that political relations between India and Iran cannot be understood fully unless their historical and cultural genealogy is carefully examined. Contemporary cooperation in diplomacy, trade, energy, connectivity and regional security derives emotional legitimacy from an older memory of contact. India's Iran policy is strengthened by the awareness that Iran is not merely a West Asian state but a civilizational neighbour; Iran's India policy is similarly enriched by the knowledge that

India is not merely a market but a cultural space deeply touched by Persianate influences. In this sense, history functions as *soft strategic capital*.

2.1 Ancient Links Between India and Iran

The ancient links between India and Iran began before the formation of modern political identities and before the emergence of present-day state boundaries. These links were embedded in a wider Indo-Iranian world in which language, belief, mythology, social imagination and ritual vocabulary displayed deep affinities. The Indo-Iranian peoples were part of a larger linguistic and cultural family whose traces are visible in Sanskrit, Avestan and Old Persian. This shared background does not mean that ancient India and ancient Iran were politically identical; rather, it means that they belonged to overlapping cultural horizons before developing into distinct civilizational formations.

Ancient India and ancient Iran were connected by geography as much as by culture. The north-western frontiers of the Indian subcontinent, including regions around the Indus, Gandhara and adjoining trans-Himalayan and trans-Iranian routes, formed corridors of movement between the Iranian plateau, Central Asia and the Indian plains. Mountains, deserts and rivers did not completely obstruct contact; they regulated it. Caravans, merchants, monks, warriors, envoys, artisans and intellectuals moved across these routes. Through such movement, ideas, commodities, scripts, symbols, religious beliefs and artistic forms circulated across Asia. Thus, ancient Indo-Iranian contact may be understood as a process of *transregional circulation*.

The Achaemenid Empire created one of the earliest historically visible phases of contact between Iran and north-western India. Parts of the Indus region came within the orbit of Achaemenid authority, and this political connection facilitated administrative, commercial and cultural exchange. Indian goods such as ivory, gold, aromatic substances and luxury materials were known in wider imperial trade networks. This period is important because it placed portions of the Indian subcontinent within a larger imperial geography stretching toward Iran and West Asia. It also introduced Indian regions to forms of imperial organization, tribute systems, administrative practices and artistic influences associated with ancient Persia.

Ancient trade between India and Iran was not restricted to overland routes. Maritime exchange through the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf also connected

western India with southern Iran and Mesopotamia. Coastal Gujarat, Sindh, Makran, Hormuz, the Persian Gulf and the wider Indian Ocean formed an early commercial zone in which merchants carried textiles, spices, beads, precious stones, ivory, metals and aromatic products. The sea was not a barrier; it was a *liquid corridor of civilization*. Through maritime trade, India and Iran participated in a wider commercial ecology linking South Asia, West Asia and the Mediterranean world.

The religious and mythological affinities between India and Iran were equally significant. Vedic and Avestan traditions contain comparable linguistic forms, ritual concepts and mythic structures. Words connected with deities, social order, sacrifice, moral law and cosmic struggle show evidence of deep historical relationship. Over time, the religious traditions of India and Iran developed in different directions: Vedic religion evolved within the Indian civilizational framework, while Zoroastrianism became one of the defining spiritual traditions of ancient Iran. Yet their older affinities reveal a common civilizational ancestry and intellectual proximity.

The movement of knowledge between India and Iran continued through later ancient and early medieval periods. Indian astronomy, mathematics, medicine, fables and philosophical ideas travelled westward through Iran and the wider Islamic world, while Iranian literary, administrative and artistic influences moved eastward toward India. The transmission of Indian narrative traditions into Persian and Arabic literary worlds illustrates this process. Texts, stories and scientific ideas rarely remained confined to one land; they travelled through translation, adaptation and reinterpretation. Such exchanges demonstrate the *cosmopolitan character of pre-modern Asia*.

Ancient links between India and Iran therefore created a foundation of familiarity. These links did not produce a single uniform civilization, but they produced a shared vocabulary of cultural recognition. India and Iran became separate civilizational entities, yet they remained historically intelligible to each other. This is why later Indo-Persian culture could flourish so powerfully in India: it did not enter a completely alien world, but a world already prepared by older layers of Indo-Iranian affinity.

2.1.1 Indo-Iranian Cultural Connections

The Indo-Iranian cultural connection is one of the most fascinating examples of ancient civilizational kinship in world history. It belongs to the deep

prehistory of Asia, when the ancestors of Indo-Aryan and Iranian-speaking peoples shared certain linguistic, ritual and mythological elements before their gradual differentiation. The term *Indo-Iranian* refers not to a modern political identity but to an ancient cultural-linguistic formation. This formation helps explain why Sanskrit, Avestan and Old Persian display striking historical relationships, and why Vedic and Iranian traditions share certain conceptual resonances.

Language is the most powerful evidence of Indo-Iranian cultural connection. Sanskrit and Avestan preserve parallel forms that reveal an earlier linguistic relationship. The Sanskrit term *arya* and the Avestan *airya* reflect related cultural self-designations. Similarly, ritual vocabulary, terms for divine and cosmic order, and social categories show older affinities. This linguistic relationship is not a superficial resemblance created by later borrowing; it is rooted in a shared linguistic ancestry. As indicated in works on Indo-Iranian philology and comparative linguistics, the relationship between Vedic Sanskrit and Avestan is one of the great keys to understanding the deep cultural history of Asia.

The Indo-Iranian cultural world was also marked by comparable religious imagination. Both Vedic and Avestan traditions were concerned with cosmic order, moral struggle, sacred speech, ritual performance and the relationship between human conduct and divine order. In the Vedic world, the idea of *ṛta* represented cosmic order, truth and regularity; in the Iranian world, related concepts developed within the Zoroastrian framework of truth, righteousness and opposition to falsehood. Although the two traditions later developed distinct theological directions, their older proximity remains intellectually significant. It reveals a shared concern with *cosmic morality* and *sacral order*.

The mythological connection between India and Iran also appears in comparable figures, motifs and symbolic structures. Certain divine names, heroic themes and cosmological ideas show traces of common ancestry, even where later religious developments created differences or reversals. The study of these connections has occupied scholars of comparative religion, philology and mythology. Works such as A. L. Basham's *The Wonder That Was India*, Arthur Christensen's writings on ancient Iran, and comparative studies of Indo-European religion help demonstrate that ancient India and Iran must be read in relation to each other, not in isolation.

Cultural connection also existed through social and ritual practices. Fire, sacrifice, sacred recitation, priestly memory and the authority of transmitted knowledge occupied important positions in both early Indo-Aryan and Iranian religious cultures. Zoroastrian reverence for fire and Vedic sacrificial traditions are not identical, but both show the centrality of ritual purity, sacred performance and cosmic participation. These similarities must be handled carefully, without crude oversimplification, but they reveal a world in which ritual was not merely religious activity; it was a *cosmic technology* through which humans participated in universal order.

The Indo-Iranian cultural connection further extended into ideas of kingship, nobility and social organization. Ancient Persian imperial culture and early Indian political thought both valued order, hierarchy, royal responsibility and the moral legitimacy of rule. Although the political systems differed, both civilizations developed sophisticated ideas of sovereignty. The Achaemenid inscriptions, with their emphasis on order and royal duty, and early Indian political traditions, later reflected in texts such as *Arthashastra*, show that ancient Asian statecraft was deeply connected with moral and cosmic frameworks. Power was not merely coercive; it required symbolic and ethical legitimation.

These cultural connections did not disappear with historical separation. They remained as subterranean currents beneath later contact. When Persian culture entered India during the medieval period, it found a civilization capable of absorbing, transforming and elevating foreign elements. This capacity for assimilation was partly rooted in India's long tradition of receiving and reworking external influences. Similarly, Iran's own civilizational history had been marked by its ability to integrate older Iranian, Mesopotamian, Hellenistic, Islamic and Central Asian influences. Thus, both India and Iran were *civilizationally absorptive* societies.

The Indo-Iranian cultural connection must therefore be understood as a deep historical foundation, not as a decorative cultural similarity. It explains why India and Iran repeatedly interacted with intellectual ease across centuries. It gave later relations a sense of memory, dignity and familiarity. The ancient Indo-Iranian background remains one of the strongest arguments for describing India–Iran relations as a relationship of *civilizational fraternity*.

2.1.2 Language, Religion and Trade Linkages

Language has been one of the most durable bridges between India and Iran. The relationship between Sanskrit, Avestan and Old Persian reveals a common Indo-Iranian linguistic inheritance. Sanskrit became the sacred and classical language of Indian civilization, while Avestan became the sacred language of Zoroastrian scripture and Old Persian became the language of Achaemenid royal inscriptions. Their similarities in vocabulary, sound patterns and grammatical structures show that India and Iran were historically connected at a very deep linguistic level. This linguistic kinship forms the earliest intellectual bridge between the two civilizations.

The importance of language did not end with the ancient period. In the medieval and early modern periods, Persian became one of the most influential languages in India. It was used in administration, diplomacy, poetry, historiography, theology, philosophy and courtly culture. Persian was not simply imported into India; it was naturalized, Indianized and made part of the subcontinent's cultural personality. The emergence of Indo-Persian literature created a magnificent intellectual world in which Indian themes were expressed through Persian literary refinement. This linguistic relationship later contributed to the growth of Urdu, whose vocabulary, poetic forms and literary aesthetics were deeply influenced by Persian.

Religion formed another profound connection. Ancient Vedic religion and Zoroastrianism shared older Indo-Iranian roots, even though they developed into distinct religious systems. Zoroastrianism, associated with the teachings of Zarathustra, became one of the major religious traditions of ancient Iran. Its emphasis on truth, righteousness, cosmic struggle and moral choice gave Iranian civilization a powerful ethical framework. In India, Vedic religion evolved into broader Hindu traditions, while Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and other spiritual traditions emerged over time. The relationship between Indian and Iranian religious history is therefore not one of sameness, but of *genealogical proximity* and later diversification.

The migration of Zoroastrians from Iran to India added a remarkable human dimension to religious linkage. The Parsis, who settled mainly in western India, especially Gujarat and later Bombay, preserved their Zoroastrian faith while becoming deeply integrated into Indian society. Their story is one of the finest examples of India's civilizational hospitality. The Parsi community contributed enormously to Indian industry, philanthropy, education, law,

science, armed forces, literature and public life. This community remains a living symbol of the historical bond between India and Iran. It shows that civilizational relations are not only carried by texts and trade, but also by communities.

Islam added another major layer to religious and cultural linkage between India and Iran. After Iran became a great centre of Islamic civilization, Persian became one of the principal languages of Islamic spirituality, philosophy and literary expression. Sufi saints, poets and scholars transmitted Persian religious and mystical ideas into India. The works of Rumi, Saadi, Hafez, Attar and Jami influenced Indian devotional and literary culture. Sufi orders such as the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri and Naqshbandi interacted with Persianate spiritual worlds. Through Sufism, Indo-Iranian relations acquired a deep *mystical and emotional vocabulary*.

Trade constituted the material foundation of these linkages. From ancient times, India and Iran exchanged luxury goods, textiles, spices, precious stones, metals, horses, dry fruits, medicines, perfumes and crafted objects. Indian cotton textiles and spices were valued in West Asian markets, while Iranian horses, carpets, metalwork, fruits and artistic goods reached India. Trade was not merely an economic activity; it was a carrier of civilization. Merchants brought not only goods but also languages, scripts, habits, rituals, stories and social practices. Commercial movement created cultural familiarity.

The Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea played a crucial role in commercial relations. Ports on India's western coast were connected to ports in Iran, Arabia and East Africa. These maritime routes created a commercial civilization of sailors, brokers, financiers, shipbuilders and merchant communities. Indian merchants were active in Persian commercial networks, and Iranian goods circulated in Indian markets. The sea gave India and Iran a common economic horizon. In this sense, the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf may be described as *maritime archives of Indo-Iranian interaction*.

Overland trade routes were equally significant. The routes passing through Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Iranian plateau connected India with Persia and beyond. Caravans transported goods, but they also transported knowledge. Cities such as Herat, Balkh, Bukhara, Kandahar, Multan, Lahore, Delhi, Isfahan and Shiraz formed part of a wider commercial-cultural geography. These urban centres became spaces where Indian, Iranian, Central

Asian and Islamic influences met. The resulting cultural world was plural, multilingual and highly sophisticated.

The linkages of language, religion and trade therefore created an integrated civilizational system. Language allowed communication, religion gave moral and spiritual meaning, and trade provided material continuity. Together, they produced a relationship that was durable, flexible and multilayered. India and Iran were connected not only by courts and kings but also by monks, priests, Sufis, traders, translators, sailors, scribes, poets and ordinary communities. This is why the historical relationship survived political disruptions. It was not dependent on one empire or dynasty; it was embedded in society itself.

2.1.3 Persian Influence on Indian Civilization

Persian influence on Indian civilization is one of the most refined and consequential cultural phenomena in South Asian history. It affected language, literature, administration, architecture, painting, music, cuisine, etiquette, historiography, diplomacy and political imagination. This influence was not mechanical imitation; it was creative assimilation. India did not merely receive Persian culture passively; it transformed it into an Indo-Persian synthesis of extraordinary sophistication. The result was neither purely Persian nor merely Indian, but a new civilizational formation whose grandeur is visible in literature, monuments, manuscripts, courtly culture and social manners.

The Persian language became one of the most important vehicles of high culture in medieval and early modern India. During the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods, Persian served as the language of administration, diplomacy and elite literary expression. Official records, royal orders, chronicles, poetry, biographies, histories and philosophical works were written in Persian. This linguistic adoption gave Indian political culture a cosmopolitan character. Persian connected Indian courts with Central Asia, Iran and the broader Islamic world. It also created a class of scholars, secretaries, poets and historians who operated within a transregional intellectual community.

Persian literature profoundly shaped Indian literary aesthetics. The ghazal, masnavi, qasida, rubai and other poetic forms influenced literary production in India. Persian poets found patronage in Indian courts, and Indian-born poets wrote exquisite Persian verse. Amir Khusrau stands as one of the most luminous figures in this Indo-Persian world. His poetry, music and cultural

imagination helped bridge Indian and Persian traditions. Later poets and scholars continued this synthesis, making India one of the great centres of Persian literary production outside Iran. The Indo-Persian literary world was therefore not peripheral; it was central to the history of Persianate civilization.

Persian influence on Indian administration was equally important. The vocabulary of governance, revenue, record-keeping, diplomacy and court procedure became deeply Persianized. Terms related to office, rank, taxation, land administration, military organization and legal procedure entered Indian political language. Even after the decline of Persian as an official language under British rule, many Persian administrative terms survived in Indian languages and institutional memory. This shows the depth of Persian influence on Indian statecraft. Persian did not remain a courtly ornament; it became part of the operational grammar of governance.

Architecture provides one of the most visible expressions of Persian influence. Indo-Persian architectural styles are visible in arches, domes, iwans, charbagh gardens, calligraphy, tile work, symmetry, geometric design and monumental spatial planning. The Mughal garden, inspired by Persian concepts of paradise and order, became a powerful symbol of imperial refinement. The Taj Mahal, Humayun's Tomb, Fatehpur Sikri, Red Fort, Shalimar gardens and several other monuments reveal the fusion of Persian design principles with Indian craftsmanship, materials and aesthetic sensibilities. Persian influence did not erase Indian forms; it entered into dialogue with them.

Painting and manuscript culture also underwent Persianate transformation. Persian miniature painting traditions influenced Mughal painting, but Indian artists enriched these forms with local colours, naturalism, portraiture and narrative vitality. Mughal ateliers became laboratories of cultural synthesis where Persian, Central Asian, Indian and European influences met. Illustrated manuscripts, royal albums and historical paintings became instruments of imperial memory and aesthetic sophistication. This artistic fusion reveals the *syncretic magnificence* of Indo-Persian civilization.

Persian influence on music and performance culture was similarly important. While Indian classical music had its own ancient roots, Indo-Persian courtly culture contributed to musical forms, instruments, terminology and performance aesthetics. The association of Amir Khusrau with musical innovation, whether historically precise in every detail or partly legendary,

symbolizes the deep interaction between Persianate and Indian musical worlds. Court patronage, Sufi assemblies and urban cultural life provided spaces for this interaction. Music became another field in which India and Iran met through creativity rather than conquest.

Cuisine and social manners also absorbed Persian elements. Dishes, culinary techniques, dry fruits, aromatic rice preparations, kebabs, sweets and courtly dining practices entered Indian elite and urban culture. Words of Persian origin became common in everyday language, especially in north India. Etiquette, dress, garden culture, perfume, calligraphy, book production and ceremonial practices reflected Persian refinement. The influence reached not only royal courts but also urban households, bazaars, literary circles and religious institutions.

Persian influence also shaped Indian historiography. Medieval Indian historical writing developed significantly in Persian. Court chronicles, biographies, travel accounts and administrative records became major sources for reconstructing the political, cultural and social history of India. Writers such as Ziauddin Barani, Abul Fazl, Badauni and many others produced works that combined political observation, moral reflection and literary elegance. Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama* and *Ain-i-Akbari* stand as monumental examples of Indo-Persian intellectual production. Such texts show how Persian became the language through which Indian imperial history was recorded and interpreted.

The emergence of Urdu represents another profound consequence of Persian influence. Urdu developed through the interaction of local Indo-Aryan speech forms with Persian, Arabic and Turkic vocabulary in military, urban and courtly environments. Its poetic tradition, especially the ghazal, carried Persian aesthetics into a new Indian linguistic form. Poets such as Mir, Ghalib, Zauq and Iqbal inherited and transformed Persian literary sensibility. Urdu became one of the great languages of South Asian emotional, philosophical and poetic expression. Thus, Persian influence did not remain confined to Persian; it generated new Indian linguistic creativity.

The Persian impact on Indian civilization should not be understood as cultural domination alone. It was a process of *acculturation*, *translation*, *adaptation* and *creative indigenization*. India possessed a remarkable capacity to absorb external influences without losing its civilizational distinctiveness. Persian culture, when entering India, changed India; but India also changed Persian

culture. Indo-Persian civilization became a shared creation, produced by migrants, scholars, rulers, artisans, poets, Sufis, administrators and common people. It was one of the most elegant examples of cultural synthesis in world history.

Book-based scholarship repeatedly highlights this synthesis. A. L. Basham's *The Wonder That Was India* emphasizes India's historical capacity for cultural absorption. Tara Chand's *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* discusses the deep cultural transformations produced by Islamic and Persianate contacts. Richard Eaton's *India in the Persianate Age* presents India as an important part of the wider Persianate world. Muzaffar Alam's work on Persian political culture in India shows how Persian became central to Indo-Islamic governance and intellectual life. These scholarly works collectively demonstrate that Persian influence was not marginal; it was constitutive of medieval and early modern Indian civilization.

In conclusion, Persian influence on Indian civilization was deep, multidimensional and historically enduring. It enriched Indian language, literature, administration, architecture, painting, music, cuisine, etiquette and historiography. It produced an Indo-Persian cultural world whose legacy remains visible in modern India's monuments, languages, poetry, social practices and intellectual traditions. This influence gives India–Iran relations an extraordinary cultural depth. Contemporary diplomacy between India and Iran stands upon this historical foundation of *shared refinement, civilizational intimacy* and *creative synthesis*.

2.2 India and Iran Before 1947

India and Iran before 1947 were not connected through the formal apparatus of modern diplomacy, because India remained under different imperial and colonial formations for much of the period and Iran itself passed through ancient empires, Islamic dynasties, Safavid consolidation, Qajar rule and early Pahlavi modernization. Yet, long before the emergence of the Republic of India and the modern Iranian state, the peoples, languages, faiths, merchants, poets, administrators and intellectuals of the two regions had created an extraordinarily rich world of *civilizational intercourse*. This pre-1947 relationship may be described as a relationship of *historical osmosis*, in which cultural ideas, commercial practices, religious movements, literary

styles and administrative traditions moved across frontiers without requiring modern treaties or embassies.

Before 1947, the Indian subcontinent and the Iranian plateau were linked by three principal channels: *culture*, *language* and *commerce*. Culture created emotional and symbolic proximity; language created intellectual and administrative intimacy; commerce created practical and material interdependence. Together, these channels produced a historical relationship far deeper than temporary political contact. The Indo-Iranian connection moved through overland routes across Afghanistan, Central Asia and the north-western frontiers of India, and through maritime routes across the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and western Indian ports. Therefore, the relationship was both *continental* and *maritime*, both *elite* and *popular*, both *spiritual* and *commercial*.

The ancient period laid the earliest foundations of Indo-Iranian interaction through linguistic and cultural affinities. The medieval period intensified the relationship through the arrival and indigenization of Persianate political culture in India. The early modern period, especially under the Mughals, witnessed the full flowering of Indo-Persian civilization. The colonial period transformed this older cultural system by replacing Persian with English as the principal language of power, yet Persianate habits, vocabulary, literature, legal expressions, poetry, architecture, cuisine and etiquette continued to survive in Indian society. Thus, even before the birth of independent India, Iran had already become a part of India's historical consciousness.

The significance of the pre-1947 period lies in the fact that modern India–Iran diplomacy rests upon this inherited cultural capital. Contemporary political leaders frequently invoke the *civilizational connect* between India and Iran because this phrase is not a diplomatic exaggeration; it reflects a historical reality. India's Persianate inheritance is visible in monuments, language, literature, music, Sufi shrines, administrative vocabulary, food culture and social manners. Iran's historical memory of India is equally shaped by trade, scholarship, religion, stories, migration and cultural exchange. The pre-1947 background therefore provides the emotional legitimacy for modern diplomatic relations.

2.2.1 Cultural Relations During Ancient and Medieval Periods

The cultural relations between India and Iran during the ancient and medieval periods were marked by deep antiquity, gradual layering and remarkable absorptive capacity. In the ancient period, the Indo-Iranian linguistic and cultural relationship created a foundation of familiarity between the two civilizational worlds. Sanskrit, Avestan and Old Persian belonged to related linguistic traditions, and this relationship reflected a deeper cultural proximity. Ancient Indian and Iranian societies developed distinct religious and philosophical systems, yet both were concerned with cosmic order, moral law, ritual discipline and sacred speech. This shared intellectual ancestry created the earliest foundation of *civilizational affinity*.

The Achaemenid period brought sections of north-western India into contact with imperial Persian power. This contact introduced channels of administrative, commercial and artistic interaction. Although political control was limited to certain regions and periods, the significance of this contact lies in the widening of India's north-western world into an imperial Persian sphere. Indian commodities such as ivory, gold, aromatic substances and luxury goods reached the Achaemenid world, while Persian administrative practices and imperial aesthetics influenced frontier regions. Thus, ancient Indo-Iranian relations were not only mythological or linguistic; they had concrete political and economic manifestations.

The Sassanian period further strengthened Indo-Iranian cultural exchanges. Sassanian Iran was a powerful civilizational centre, and its contact with India occurred through maritime trade, diplomatic exchanges and intellectual movement. Persian Gulf merchants connected Iranian ports with western Indian coasts, especially Gujarat, Konkan and Malabar. Through these routes, goods moved, but so did ideas, stories, artistic motifs and religious practices. Indian scientific and narrative traditions travelled westward, while Iranian cultural forms entered Indian and Central Asian circuits. The relationship was therefore characterized by *reciprocal transmission*, not unilateral influence.

The migration of Zoroastrians from Iran to India after the Islamic conquest of Persia represents one of the most humane and historically significant episodes in India–Iran cultural relations. The Parsis, who settled in western India, particularly Gujarat and later Bombay, preserved their Zoroastrian faith while becoming deeply integrated into Indian society. Their story is an example of India's *civilizational hospitality* and Iran's cultural continuity

outside its own territory. The Parsi community later contributed immensely to Indian commerce, industry, philanthropy, education, law, public life and nationalism. This migration converted a religious displacement into a bridge of enduring friendship.

The medieval period introduced a new and powerful layer: the Persianate-Islamic cultural world. After the Arab conquest of Iran, Persia became a major centre of Islamic civilization while preserving its distinctive Persian language, literary sophistication and civilizational self-consciousness. As Muslim dynasties entered and established rule in parts of India, they brought with them not only political authority but also Persianate cultural forms. Persian became the language of refinement, poetry, diplomacy, administration and intellectual elegance. This did not destroy Indian civilization; rather, India absorbed and transformed Persianate culture, producing a distinctive Indo-Persian synthesis.

Sufism played a particularly important role in the cultural relationship. Persian Sufi poetry and metaphysics profoundly influenced Indian spiritual life. Sufi saints, scholars and poets created networks that linked Iran, Central Asia and India. The writings of Rumi, Saadi, Hafez, Attar and Jami circulated among Indian scholars, mystics and literary elites. Sufi hospices became spaces of social dialogue, ethical teaching, music, poetry and spiritual fellowship. Through Sufism, Persian culture entered India not merely as courtly refinement but as *mystical humanism*. It touched ordinary people, vernacular languages and devotional traditions.

The Delhi Sultanate period saw the consolidation of Persian as a language of power and high culture. Persian scholars, administrators, theologians and poets migrated to India, especially during periods of political disturbance in Central Asia and Iran. India became a refuge and patronage centre for Persianate talent. This inflow strengthened literary culture, court etiquette, historiography and administration. The Indian court became part of a broader Persianate world extending from Iran and Central Asia to Anatolia and the Indian subcontinent. India was not peripheral to this world; it became one of its most dynamic centres.

The Mughal period represented the zenith of Indo-Persian cultural synthesis. The Mughal rulers were of Timurid-Central Asian background and inherited strong Persianate traditions. Under them, Persian culture achieved extraordinary institutional and aesthetic development in India. Persian

became the language of imperial administration, royal correspondence, court chronicles, poetry, philosophy and refined conversation. Mughal architecture combined Persian ideas of symmetry, garden design and monumental form with Indian materials, craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibilities. The result was a cultural formation of rare grandeur.

The Mughal court also became a great centre of translation and intellectual dialogue. Under Akbar, major Sanskrit works were translated into Persian, including texts associated with Indian philosophy, mythology and ethics. This translation movement was not merely literary; it was civilizational. It allowed Persian-reading elites to encounter Indian intellectual traditions, and it brought Sanskritic knowledge into a Persian cosmopolitan framework. The translation of Indian texts into Persian may be regarded as one of the most refined examples of *inter-civilizational hermeneutics* in pre-modern Asia.

Indian art, music and architecture absorbed Persian influences but did not become imitations of Iran. The Indo-Persian synthesis was creative and locally rooted. Persian miniature painting traditions influenced Mughal painting, but Indian painters added portraiture, naturalistic detail, vibrant colour and narrative richness. Persian garden design influenced Mughal gardens, but Indian climatic, spatial and symbolic conditions transformed them. Persian literary genres influenced Indian poetry, but Indian emotions, themes and languages reshaped them. This creative interaction produced a unique cultural world that may rightly be called *Indo-Persian civilization*.

Therefore, cultural relations between India and Iran during ancient and medieval periods were not episodic contacts but a continuous and cumulative process. They involved linguistic kinship, religious migration, Sufi networks, artistic exchange, literary patronage, court culture, architecture, music, translation and social assimilation. This cultural background explains why India–Iran relations possess unusual historical warmth. Their modern diplomacy is supported by the memory of a past in which both civilizations encountered each other not as strangers but as participants in a shared Asian cultural universe.

2.2.2 Persian Language in Indian Courts

The Persian language occupies a majestic and almost unparalleled place in the history of Indian courts. It was not merely a foreign language used by ruling elites; it became a language of *sovereignty, administration, aesthetic*

refinement, historical memory, diplomatic communication and intellectual prestige. From the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal Empire and many regional courts, Persian functioned as the principal language of power and high culture. Its use in India created a vast Indo-Persian literary and administrative world that shaped the subcontinent for centuries.

Persian entered Indian courts with the establishment of Muslim political authority in north India, but its influence expanded far beyond the requirements of conquest. It became the language through which kings issued orders, nobles communicated, historians wrote chronicles, poets composed verse, judges interpreted legal matters, and administrators maintained records. Persian provided a sophisticated vocabulary of governance. Terms relating to revenue, land, office, rank, diplomacy, law and military organization entered Indian political life. Many such terms survived even after Persian ceased to be an official language, demonstrating the depth of its administrative imprint.

The Delhi Sultanate made Persian a major court language. Rulers patronized Persian poets, historians, secretaries, jurists and scholars. The language became associated with prestige, education and political advancement. A person aspiring to administrative service or courtly recognition often needed mastery of Persian. This produced a class of scribes, munshis, scholars and literary elites who mediated between power and society. Persian thus became not only a language but a professional culture. It created a bureaucratic and intellectual elite trained in style, rhetoric, documentation and courtly etiquette.

Amir Khusrau represents one of the brightest stars of this Indo-Persian world. A poet, musician, intellectual and cultural mediator, he symbolized the fusion of Indian and Persian elements. His writings reveal Persian literary refinement infused with Indian imagery, sensibility and musicality. Khusrau's cultural personality demonstrates that Persian in India did not remain alien; it became Indianized. His legacy occupies a special place in the history of Indo-Persian literature and in the broader cultural imagination of India.

The Mughal court elevated Persian to its highest imperial status. Babur wrote his memoir in Chagatai Turkish, but the Mughal state increasingly adopted Persian as the language of administration and high culture. Humayun's exile in Safavid Iran deepened Persian artistic and courtly influences, which later entered the Mughal imperial system. Akbar institutionalized Persian at the

centre of administration and culture. Under Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and later rulers, Persian became the language in which imperial ideology, administrative order and aesthetic grandeur were articulated.

Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama* and *Ain-i-Akbari* stand as monumental achievements of Indo-Persian historiography. These works were not merely chronicles; they were instruments of imperial self-representation, administrative documentation and philosophical reflection on kingship. Through Persian prose, Abul Fazl expressed a vision of sovereignty marked by order, tolerance, hierarchy, discipline and universal kingship. Such texts show that Persian was central to the conceptualization of Mughal power. The empire thought, wrote and remembered itself in Persian.

Persian also became the language of translation and intellectual encounter. Akbar's court sponsored the translation of Sanskrit texts into Persian, including works connected with the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Yoga Vasistha* and other traditions. This translation enterprise allowed Indian philosophical and religious texts to enter the Persianate intellectual sphere. It also encouraged interreligious dialogue and comparative reflection. Persian became a bridge language through which Sanskrit, Islamic, Persian and Central Asian intellectual traditions could converse.

Regional courts in India also adopted Persian. Deccan sultanates, Rajput courts, Awadh, Hyderabad, Bengal, Punjab and several other political centres used Persian for administration, diplomacy and literary production. Even many Hindu elites became proficient in Persian because it was necessary for governance and prestige. Persian was not restricted to Muslim courts; it became a shared language of elite political culture across religious communities. This fact is crucial because it shows that Persian in India was not merely sectarian; it was civilizational and administrative.

The influence of Persian on Indian languages was profound. Persian vocabulary entered Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi and other languages in varying degrees. Urdu, in particular, developed through deep interaction between local Indo-Aryan speech forms and Persian-Arabic vocabulary and literary aesthetics. The ghazal tradition, with its subtle emotional architecture and symbolic vocabulary, owes much to Persian forms. Indian poetry, especially in Urdu, became a continuation and transformation of Persian poetic sensibility. Ghalib, Mir, Zauq, Iqbal and many others inherited this Persianate world and made it deeply Indian.

The decline of Persian in Indian courts began under British colonial rule. In 1837, the British replaced Persian with English and vernacular languages in many areas of administration. This change was not merely linguistic; it marked a profound shift in India's political culture. Persian lost its official dominance, and English became the new language of power, law and administration. Yet Persian did not disappear. Its vocabulary survived in courts, revenue records, poetry, religion, social life and everyday speech. Its literary prestige continued in madrasas, universities, private libraries, Sufi circles and poetic assemblies.

The historical importance of Persian in Indian courts is therefore immense. It shaped the administrative culture of India, enriched its literary traditions, influenced its languages, recorded its medieval and early modern history, and provided a medium of civilizational synthesis. Persian gave India access to a wider Persianate world, while India gave Persian culture new geographical depth, social diversity and creative vitality. In the vocabulary of cultural history, Persian in Indian courts was not an imported ornament; it was a *constitutive language of Indian civilization*.

2.2.3 Trade and Intellectual Exchanges

Trade and intellectual exchanges formed the material and cerebral foundations of Indo-Iranian relations before 1947. While courts, dynasties and empires shaped official contact, merchants, sailors, scholars, translators, physicians, astronomers, Sufis and storytellers sustained the deeper relationship between society and civilization. India and Iran were connected by commodities, but they were equally connected by ideas. The movement of goods created routes; the movement of ideas gave those routes meaning. Thus, Indo-Iranian exchange may be called a system of *commercial-intellectual circulation*.

Ancient trade between India and Iran was carried through both land and sea. Overland routes connected the Indian subcontinent with Iran through Afghanistan, Central Asia and the north-western frontier. Maritime routes connected western Indian ports with the Persian Gulf and Iranian ports. Goods such as textiles, spices, precious stones, ivory, aromatic substances, medicines, metals, horses, dry fruits, carpets and luxury objects moved through these routes. Indian cotton textiles and spices were particularly valued in West Asian markets, while Iranian horses, fruits, carpets and metalwork had importance in India.

The Persian Gulf played a central role in Indo-Iranian commerce. Ports such as Siraf, Hormuz, Basra and later Bandar Abbas connected Iranian and Gulf commerce with Indian ports such as Cambay, Surat, Bharuch, Calicut and later Bombay. The Arabian Sea functioned as a shared commercial space. Monsoon winds enabled predictable navigation and allowed merchants to establish seasonal trading rhythms. This maritime world was cosmopolitan: Persians, Indians, Arabs, Armenians, Jews and later Europeans participated in its commercial networks. Trade was therefore not merely bilateral; it was embedded in a wider Indian Ocean economy.

Indian merchant communities were especially important in early modern Indo-Persian trade. Hindu, Jain, Muslim and Parsi merchants from Gujarat, Sindh, Multan, Rajasthan and other regions operated across Iran, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. Many served as bankers, moneylenders, brokers and commercial intermediaries. Their presence in Iranian commercial centres demonstrates the depth of India's economic footprint in the Persianate world. These merchants carried not only capital and goods but also social institutions, accounting practices, religious customs and linguistic abilities.

Horse trade was a particularly important aspect of Indo-Iranian commerce. Indian rulers, especially in medieval and early modern periods, required high-quality horses for cavalry. Since many parts of India were not ideal for breeding warhorses, horses were imported from Iran, Central Asia and Arabia. This trade had strategic importance because cavalry was central to pre-modern warfare. Thus, Indo-Iranian commerce included not only luxury exchange but also military supply. The horse trade linked economy, warfare and state formation.

Intellectual exchange was equally rich. Indian scientific knowledge, especially in mathematics, astronomy, medicine and narrative literature, moved westward through Persian and Arabic translations. Indian numerals, astronomical methods and medical ideas entered broader Islamic intellectual traditions. Conversely, Persian and Islamic knowledge in astronomy, medicine, philosophy, theology, historiography and literature entered India. This exchange was made possible by multilingual scholars who could translate and interpret across Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and regional languages.

The transmission of Indian stories into Persian literary traditions is one of the most remarkable examples of intellectual exchange. Indian narrative works,

including materials associated with the *Panchatantra*, travelled into Persian and Arabic worlds and later influenced global literature. The famous movement of Indian fables into Persian and Arabic demonstrates how stories travelled across civilizations, acquiring new forms while preserving ethical and political wisdom. Literature thus became a vehicle of diplomatic imagination and moral instruction.

During the Mughal period, intellectual exchange became institutionalized through court patronage. Akbar's translation bureau rendered Sanskrit texts into Persian, thereby creating a major bridge between Indian and Persianate knowledge systems. The translation of the *Mahabharata* into Persian as the *Razmnama* was a landmark in civilizational dialogue. Such translations were not mere linguistic exercises; they represented an attempt to understand the ethical, metaphysical and political imagination of another tradition. Persian became a medium through which Indian knowledge was presented to a cosmopolitan audience.

Sufi networks also carried intellectual and spiritual exchange. Sufi scholars and saints moved across Iran, Central Asia and India, bringing with them metaphysical ideas, poetic forms, devotional practices and ethical teachings. Sufi literature in Persian shaped Indian religious thought and emotional culture. The *khanqah*, or Sufi hospice, became a centre of teaching, charity, music, dialogue and social inclusion. Through these networks, intellectual exchange reached beyond courts and merchants into popular religious life.

Medical and scientific exchanges were also important. Unani medicine, shaped by Greek, Persian, Arabic and Indian influences, found a significant place in India. Persian and Arabic medical texts circulated in Indian scholarly circles, while Indian medicinal knowledge also influenced wider traditions. Astronomical and mathematical ideas moved through translation and adaptation. This intellectual contact shows that Indo-Iranian relations were not limited to poetry and trade; they included practical sciences and systems of knowledge.

The colonial period altered older patterns of trade and intellectual exchange. European maritime power, British colonial rule in India, the decline of old caravan networks and the rise of modern imperial economies changed commercial routes. Bombay became a major colonial port, and trade with the Persian Gulf continued under new conditions. Indian merchants, especially Parsis, Gujaratis, Sindhis and others, remained active in Gulf commerce.

Intellectual exchange also changed as English education and colonial institutions replaced Persian as the dominant language of administration. Yet Indo-Iranian connections survived in scholarly traditions, religious communities, trade networks and cultural memory.

Thus, trade and intellectual exchanges between India and Iran before 1947 were multidimensional. They involved merchants, ports, caravans, horses, textiles, spices, books, translations, medicine, astronomy, Sufism, stories and administrative knowledge. These exchanges produced a relationship that was neither purely material nor purely spiritual. It was both. Commerce created contact; intellect created understanding; culture created continuity. This legacy continues to shape modern India–Iran relations.

2.3 Legacy of Civilizational Relations in Modern Diplomacy

The legacy of civilizational relations plays a significant role in modern India–Iran diplomacy. In contemporary international relations, states often speak the language of interests, security, trade and power. Yet, in the case of India and Iran, diplomacy is enriched by a deeper historical vocabulary. The two countries frequently refer to their *civilizational connect*, *shared heritage*, *cultural affinity* and *people-to-people relations*. These expressions are not empty ceremonial phrases; they are rooted in centuries of interaction. Civilizational memory gives modern diplomacy emotional legitimacy, symbolic depth and social resonance.

Modern diplomacy between India and Iran must be understood as a combination of *historical continuity* and *strategic adaptation*. The past provides trust, familiarity and cultural warmth; the present demands cooperation in energy, connectivity, regional stability, trade, technology and multilateral forums. Without historical memory, the relationship could become merely transactional. Without strategic adaptation, historical memory would become sterile nostalgia. The strength of India–Iran diplomacy lies in its ability to convert inherited cultural capital into contemporary diplomatic relevance.

The legacy of Indo-Persian civilization helps both countries manage political difficulties. India and Iran have not always agreed on every issue. Sanctions, nuclear diplomacy, India's relations with the United States and Israel, Iran's regional policies, Gulf rivalries and domestic sensitivities have created complications. Yet the relationship has generally avoided complete rupture

because both sides recognize the depth of their historical ties. Shared civilizational memory acts as a diplomatic stabilizer. It does not remove conflicts, but it softens them and keeps channels of communication open.

2.3.1 Shared Historical Memory

Shared historical memory is one of the most important intangible assets in India–Iran relations. It refers to the collective awareness that India and Iran have interacted for millennia through language, religion, trade, migration, art, architecture, scholarship and statecraft. This memory is preserved in texts, monuments, communities, rituals, literary traditions, diplomatic speeches and academic studies. It gives the relationship a depth that many modern partnerships lack. India and Iran are able to speak to each other not only as states but as civilizations.

The Indo-Iranian linguistic connection forms the oldest layer of shared memory. The relationship between Sanskrit, Avestan and Old Persian reminds both societies of a deep cultural genealogy. This memory does not dominate daily diplomacy, but it provides symbolic significance. It allows India and Iran to present their relationship as ancient, organic and historically dignified. Such symbolic capital matters in international relations because states seek not only material advantage but also recognition, respect and identity.

The Persianate legacy in India forms another major layer of shared memory. Persian language and culture shaped Indian courts, literature, architecture, administration and social life for centuries. The presence of Persian words in Indian languages, the beauty of Mughal architecture, the popularity of ghazal poetry, the influence of Sufi literature and the survival of Indo-Persian manuscripts all keep this memory alive. When Indian and Iranian leaders refer to civilizational ties, they are invoking this vast cultural inheritance.

The Parsi community represents a living form of shared historical memory. Their migration from Iran to India and their flourishing in Indian society symbolize religious refuge, cultural continuity and social integration. The Parsis became one of India's most respected communities, contributing to nation-building, industry, law, education, science and philanthropy. Their presence reminds both India and Iran that civilizational relations are not only preserved in books; they are embodied in people.

Shared historical memory also appears in sacred and literary geographies. Sufi shrines, Persian manuscripts, Indo-Persian poetry, Mughal monuments,

old trade routes and port cities all serve as sites of memory. They remind scholars and diplomats that India–Iran relations were formed through long social processes. This memory is plural: it includes Hindu, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Persian, Central Asian and Indian contributions. Therefore, the Indo-Iranian past is not narrow or sectarian; it is broad and composite.

In modern diplomacy, shared historical memory performs three functions. First, it provides a vocabulary of friendship. Diplomatic speeches become warmer when they refer to civilization, poetry, culture and shared heritage. Second, it creates public legitimacy for cooperation. Citizens are more likely to understand a foreign relationship when it is connected to historical familiarity. Third, it helps manage crises. When political disagreements arise, the memory of long friendship encourages restraint.

However, shared historical memory must be used with intellectual responsibility. It should not become romantic exaggeration or selective nostalgia. History contains both cooperation and conflict, both assimilation and contestation. A mature civilizational diplomacy recognizes complexity. It does not deny tensions, but it emphasizes the larger pattern of mutual enrichment. India and Iran must therefore use historical memory not as propaganda but as a refined instrument of understanding.

Thus, shared historical memory is a diplomatic resource of great value. It gives India–Iran relations symbolic dignity, emotional depth and cultural continuity. It transforms the bilateral relationship from a mere arrangement of interests into a relationship of *historically conscious statecraft*.

2.3.2 Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

Soft power refers to the ability of a country to attract, persuade and influence others through culture, values, ideas, education, heritage and moral appeal rather than coercion or payment. In India–Iran relations, soft power has a particularly rich foundation because both countries possess ancient civilizations, literary traditions, spiritual heritage and artistic prestige. Their cultural diplomacy is therefore not artificially manufactured; it grows out of a long history of contact. India's yoga, cinema, classical arts, Buddhism, Ayurveda, democracy and plural culture meet Iran's Persian poetry, architecture, philosophy, calligraphy, cinema, Sufism and civilizational pride.

Cultural diplomacy between India and Iran operates through institutions, festivals, language studies, academic exchanges, heritage preservation, tourism, film, literature and people-to-people contact. Indian cultural centres, university departments, Persian studies in India, Indology in Iran, scholarships and academic collaborations help sustain intellectual contact. These activities may appear modest compared to strategic projects such as Chabahar, but they are indispensable because they create long-term goodwill. Diplomacy without cultural warmth becomes mechanical; cultural diplomacy gives it emotional resonance.

Persian studies in India form a major component of soft power. Several Indian universities and institutions have preserved Persian language and literature as fields of study. Manuscript collections in India contain a vast treasure of Persian works, including poetry, history, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, theology and administrative documents. These manuscripts are not merely academic objects; they are archives of Indo-Iranian civilization. Their study can strengthen cultural diplomacy by reminding both countries of their shared intellectual heritage.

Indian soft power in Iran has also been significant. Indian cinema has enjoyed popularity in many parts of West Asia, including Iran. Indian music, dance, yoga, cuisine and philosophical traditions have generated curiosity and admiration. Yoga, in particular, has become a global cultural instrument of India's soft power. In Iran, where spiritual and poetic traditions are highly valued, Indian cultural traditions can find meaningful reception. Cultural exchange therefore allows India to appear not only as a strategic actor but as a civilization of depth.

Iranian soft power in India is equally important. Persian poetry has long influenced Indian literary sensibility. Hafez, Saadi, Rumi and Khayyam are not unknown names in India's literary and intellectual circles. Sufi poetry and Persian metaphors shaped Urdu and Indian poetic traditions. Iranian cinema, known for its artistic subtlety, humanism and moral depth, has also been appreciated by Indian film scholars and audiences. Persian architecture and aesthetic forms remain visible in India's heritage sites. Iran's soft power in India therefore rests upon literary refinement, spiritual thought and artistic sophistication.

Cultural diplomacy also has a heritage dimension. Mughal monuments, Indo-Persian manuscripts, Sufi shrines, old trade sites and Parsi heritage can

become points of collaboration. India and Iran can jointly support conferences, exhibitions, translations, digital archives, restoration projects and academic chairs. Such initiatives can convert historical memory into practical cultural cooperation. A shared manuscript project, for example, can have diplomatic value because it brings scholars, institutions and governments together around a common heritage.

People-to-people relations are a vital part of soft power. Students, tourists, pilgrims, traders, artists, scholars, doctors, sportspersons and professionals carry impressions of one country into another. Iranian students in India and Indian visitors to Iran contribute to mutual understanding. Medical, educational and cultural exchanges create human networks that survive beyond political fluctuations. Such networks are especially important when formal economic relations are constrained by sanctions or geopolitical tensions.

Soft power also helps balance hard geopolitical pressures. India and Iran face external constraints in areas such as trade, banking, energy and security cooperation. Cultural diplomacy can continue even when strategic cooperation faces obstacles. It keeps the relationship alive during difficult periods. It also prevents public opinion from becoming excessively influenced by hostile narratives. A relationship supported by cultural familiarity is more resilient than one based only on short-term transactions.

However, cultural diplomacy must be modernized. India and Iran should not rely only on historical nostalgia. They need contemporary cultural cooperation in digital humanities, film festivals, translation programmes, tourism circuits, language technology, museum collaboration, youth exchanges and academic research. The legacy of Persian in India and Sanskrit-Indological interest in Iran can be renewed through modern platforms. Civilizational diplomacy must enter the digital age if it is to remain socially relevant.

In conclusion, soft power and cultural diplomacy constitute a major pillar of India–Iran relations. They provide attraction, trust, recognition and emotional legitimacy. They make diplomacy humane. They allow India and Iran to speak not only through official communiqués but through poetry, music, language, memory, heritage and shared refinement. In a world increasingly dominated by power competition, such cultural diplomacy represents a form of *civilizational statesmanship*.

2.3.3 Civilizational Identity in Foreign Policy

Civilizational identity has become an increasingly important element in contemporary foreign policy. States do not define themselves only through territory, economy and military power; they also present themselves through history, culture, values and memory. India and Iran are both civilizational states in the sense that their identities are rooted in long historical continuities extending beyond modern political boundaries. India's foreign policy frequently invokes its ancient civilization, plural traditions, spiritual heritage and democratic modernity. Iran's foreign policy invokes Persian civilization, Islamic identity, historical sovereignty and resistance to external domination. These civilizational self-understandings influence how both countries view the world and each other.

In India's foreign policy, civilizational identity provides depth to diplomatic engagement. India presents itself not merely as a postcolonial state but as an ancient civilization re-emerging as a modern power. This civilizational confidence is visible in India's emphasis on diaspora, yoga, Buddhism, Ayurveda, cultural heritage, Sanskrit knowledge, pluralism and historical connectivity. In relation to Iran, India's civilizational identity allows it to recognize Persian influence as part of its own historical formation. India's engagement with Iran is therefore not alien to India's identity; it is a return to an old cultural conversation.

Iran's foreign policy is also deeply shaped by civilizational identity. Iran sees itself as heir to ancient Persia, Zoroastrian heritage, Islamic scholarship, Persian language and regional influence. Its historical memory includes empires, poetry, philosophy, resistance to foreign domination and a strong sense of cultural dignity. This self-perception affects Iran's diplomacy. Iran seeks recognition not merely as a state under sanctions but as a civilization with historical depth and regional legitimacy. India, because of its own civilizational character and Persianate inheritance, is well placed to understand this Iranian self-image.

Civilizational identity in foreign policy does not replace material interests. India and Iran still pursue energy, trade, security, connectivity and regional influence. However, civilizational identity shapes the manner in which these interests are articulated. Chabahar, for example, is a strategic port, but it is often placed within the language of historical connectivity. Cultural exchanges are not merely symbolic events; they reinforce a narrative of

ancient partnership. Diplomatic statements invoke shared history because such language gives strategic cooperation a moral and emotional foundation.

The idea of civilizational identity also supports multipolarity. Both India and Iran are sensitive to Western domination of global narratives and institutions, though their methods and positions differ. India seeks reform of global governance through responsible participation, while Iran often adopts a more resistant posture toward Western power. Nevertheless, both value sovereign autonomy and historical dignity. Their civilizational identities encourage them to resist being treated as passive objects of great-power politics. This creates a basis for dialogue on a more plural and equitable world order.

Civilizational identity also affects regional policy. India's approach to West Asia is not based only on energy or diaspora; it also reflects historical connections with the Arab world, Persia, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. Iran's approach to Asia is similarly influenced by memories of Persian cultural reach across Central Asia, South Asia and the Islamic world. When India and Iran engage each other, they are not only calculating economic benefit; they are also negotiating their places in the historical geography of Asia.

The use of civilizational identity in foreign policy must, however, remain inclusive and sophisticated. Civilizational narratives can become dangerous if they are used for exclusion, superiority or rigid ideological claims. India–Iran relations offer a more constructive model: civilizational identity as dialogue, not domination; memory as bridge, not weapon; heritage as cooperation, not rivalry. The Indo-Persian past was composite, plural and creative. Its diplomatic use should therefore preserve that spirit of plurality.

Civilizational identity also enhances cultural confidence. For India, acknowledging Persian influence does not weaken Indian identity; it enriches it. For Iran, recognizing Indian contributions to Persianate and Islamic intellectual worlds does not diminish Persian pride; it expands it. Civilizations grow through contact. The India–Iran relationship demonstrates that cultural borrowing, translation and synthesis can produce greatness. This lesson is especially relevant in a world where narrow nationalism often misunderstands the mixed nature of civilizational history.

In modern diplomacy, civilizational identity can support practical cooperation in education, archives, heritage conservation, tourism, language studies,

media, cultural industries and academic research. India and Iran can jointly promote Indo-Persian studies, digitize manuscripts, support translation projects, encourage student exchanges, restore shared heritage sites, and develop cultural tourism circuits. Such initiatives would transform civilizational identity from rhetoric into policy.

Ultimately, civilizational identity gives India–Iran relations a distinctive character. Many countries cooperate because of temporary interests; India and Iran cooperate within a longer horizon of historical familiarity. Their relationship is neither free from disagreement nor immune to geopolitical pressure. Yet it possesses a cultural depth that allows it to survive external turbulence. The civilizational dimension does not make the relationship sentimental; it makes it resilient. It provides a deeper foundation for *strategic patience*, *diplomatic maturity* and *historical self-awareness*.

In conclusion, the legacy of civilizational relations in modern diplomacy is one of the most valuable assets of India–Iran relations. Shared historical memory gives the relationship dignity; soft power gives it attraction; cultural diplomacy gives it continuity; and civilizational identity gives it meaning. If wisely cultivated, this legacy can strengthen cooperation in the twenty-first century and help India and Iran build a partnership that is not merely transactional but historically enlightened, regionally constructive and diplomatically sophisticated.

Chapter 3:

India–Iran Relations From 1947 to 1979

The period from 1947 to 1979 constitutes the formative diplomatic era of modern India–Iran relations. It was an age in which the two old civilizations entered the modern international system as sovereign political actors, but under sharply different ideological, institutional and strategic circumstances. India emerged from British colonial rule and Partition as a democratic, secular, postcolonial republic committed to *non-alignment*, *anti-colonial solidarity*, *peaceful coexistence* and *strategic autonomy*. Iran, under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, moved gradually but decisively into the orbit of Western security architecture, especially after the 1953 coup that restored and strengthened monarchical authority. Thus, from the beginning, India and Iran possessed a deep civilizational familiarity but operated within divergent Cold War alignments.

This chapter examines India–Iran relations from Indian independence in 1947 to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The period is historically significant because it witnessed the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, the signing of the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, early high-level visits, limited but meaningful political contact, and gradual recognition of each other's strategic importance. Yet this period was also marked by distance, hesitation and political asymmetry. India's *non-aligned internationalism* and Iran's *pro-Western security orientation* did not easily converge. Iran's membership in Western-sponsored regional security arrangements, its close association with Pakistan, and its dependence on American military and political support created discomfort in New Delhi. Conversely, India's closeness to the Soviet Union after the 1960s and its advocacy of anti-colonial and Arab causes created cautious perceptions in Tehran.

Nevertheless, the period should not be described merely as one of estrangement. It was a period of *restrained engagement*. Civilizational memory, geographical awareness, energy considerations and diplomatic prudence prevented the relationship from collapsing into indifference. Indian leaders understood that Iran's location in the Persian Gulf, its oil resources, its proximity to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and its historical connection

with India made it an indispensable country in India's extended neighbourhood. Iran, for its part, recognized India as a large Asian state with ancient cultural prestige and growing international visibility. Thus, the relationship remained formally cordial even when strategic intimacy was limited.

3.1 India's Foreign Policy After Independence

India's foreign policy after independence emerged from a complex historical situation. The country had just experienced colonial exploitation, Partition, communal violence, economic weakness and territorial insecurity. Its leadership, especially Jawaharlal Nehru, understood that newly independent India had to preserve sovereignty, avoid military entanglement, support decolonization, maintain peaceful relations with neighbours, and build its own developmental capacity. Therefore, Indian foreign policy was not merely a diplomatic posture; it was a profound expression of postcolonial self-respect and national reconstruction.

The early foundations of Indian foreign policy rested upon several principles: *sovereign equality, anti-colonialism, racial equality, peaceful coexistence, non-interference, support for national liberation movements, faith in the United Nations, and independent judgment in world affairs*. India did not wish to become a subordinate satellite of either the American-led capitalist bloc or the Soviet-led communist bloc. This did not mean passivity. India wanted to participate actively in world politics, but on the basis of its own moral reasoning and national interest. Thus, India's foreign policy combined *ethical aspiration* with *strategic calculation*.

In relation to West Asia and Iran, India's foreign policy after independence was shaped by a need to balance multiple imperatives. India had to cultivate Arab states because of anti-colonial solidarity, energy needs, Indian workers, trade, and the Palestine issue. It also had to maintain historical links with Iran, a non-Arab West Asian state of immense civilizational and strategic importance. India had to avoid alienating Muslim-majority countries while preserving its secular identity. It had to manage relations with Pakistan, whose diplomacy often tried to mobilize Islamic solidarity against India. In this setting, India's approach toward Iran was cautious, respectful and long-term.

3.1.1 Non-Alignment and Strategic Autonomy

Non-alignment was the central doctrine of India's foreign policy during the early decades after independence. It is often misunderstood as neutrality or passive equidistance between power blocs. In reality, Indian non-alignment was a doctrine of *autonomous judgment*. It meant that India would evaluate international issues on their merits and would not mechanically follow Washington or Moscow. It was a method of preserving sovereignty in an international system dominated by superpower rivalry. As a postcolonial state, India considered political independence incomplete without diplomatic independence.

Jawaharlal Nehru's non-alignment was deeply shaped by anti-colonial experience. India had suffered under imperial domination and therefore opposed the division of the world into spheres of influence controlled by great powers. Non-alignment allowed India to support decolonization in Asia and Africa, oppose racial discrimination, advocate disarmament, and participate in peace diplomacy. It was therefore not an escapist doctrine; it was an activist policy based on *moral internationalism* and *strategic self-preservation*.

In the context of the Cold War, non-alignment gave India space to engage different states without joining military alliances. India could receive developmental assistance from the West, maintain political and defence relations with the Soviet Union, support Arab nationalism, engage Iran, and participate in global forums without surrendering its independent voice. This flexibility was essential for a newly independent country with limited resources and immense developmental challenges. India could not afford to become a battleground of superpower rivalry.

Strategic autonomy was the deeper impulse behind non-alignment. It meant that India's foreign policy would be guided by India's own security, development, civilizational values and geopolitical realities. In later decades, the term *strategic autonomy* became more explicit, but its roots were already present in Nehruvian non-alignment. India's refusal to join U.S.-sponsored military alliances was not merely ideological; it was based on the fear that such alliances would compromise India's freedom of action and involve it in conflicts unrelated to its national interest.

This doctrine directly affected India's relations with Iran. During the 1950s, Iran under the Shah moved closer to the Western bloc and joined the Baghdad

Pact, later associated with CENTO. India viewed such alliances with suspicion because it believed that military blocs intensified Cold War rivalry and undermined regional peace. Moreover, Pakistan's participation in Western security arrangements made India particularly cautious. Since Iran and Pakistan were both connected to the Western security structure, India could not fully separate its Iran policy from the wider strategic environment of South and West Asia.

At the same time, India's non-alignment did not require hostility toward Iran. New Delhi did not define Tehran as an enemy merely because it was close to the West. India maintained diplomatic engagement and signed the Treaty of Friendship with Iran in 1950. This was an example of *principled pragmatism*: India opposed military blocs but did not sever ties with countries that joined them. This capacity to distinguish between disagreement and hostility became a hallmark of Indian diplomacy.

Non-alignment also influenced India's approach to crises in West Asia. India tended to support anti-colonial and nationalist movements, opposed external intervention, and favoured peaceful settlement of disputes. In many cases, this brought India closer to Arab nationalist positions than to the pro-Western monarchies. Iran under the Shah, however, often saw regional security through the lens of anti-communism and monarchical stability. This divergence limited India–Iran strategic intimacy during the early Cold War period.

Nevertheless, non-alignment protected India from rigid ideological hostility toward Iran. Because India did not belong to the Soviet bloc, it could engage a pro-Western Iran without contradiction. Because India was not subordinate to the Western bloc, it could also disagree with Iran's alliance policies without becoming an enemy. Thus, non-alignment created a diplomatic middle space. It prevented complete convergence but also prevented complete estrangement.

In scholarly terms, India's non-alignment may be described as a doctrine of *sovereign manoeuvrability*. It gave India freedom to cultivate relationships according to national interest rather than bloc discipline. In the India–Iran context, this meant that historical goodwill and future strategic possibilities were preserved despite Cold War asymmetries. The relationship remained modest, but its foundations survived.

3.1.2 India's Approach Towards West Asia

India's approach towards West Asia after independence was shaped by history, geography, energy, religion, diaspora, anti-colonial solidarity and regional security. West Asia was not a distant region for India; it was part of India's extended neighbourhood. The Arabian Sea connected India to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and East Africa. Ancient trade routes, Islamic cultural contacts, Indian merchant communities and religious networks had long connected the subcontinent with West Asian societies. Therefore, independent India's West Asia policy emerged from both *civilizational memory* and *strategic necessity*.

One of the central features of India's early West Asia policy was support for anti-colonial nationalism. India sympathized with Arab struggles against colonial rule and opposed imperial domination in the region. This position was consistent with India's own experience of British rule. India's support for Egypt during the Suez Crisis of 1956, its opposition to colonial intervention, and its solidarity with newly independent Arab states reflected this broader orientation. Such policies gave India moral credibility among many Arab countries.

The Palestine question also influenced India's West Asia policy. India supported Palestinian rights and was cautious in its approach toward Israel for several decades. This policy was shaped by anti-colonial reasoning, domestic sensitivities, and India's desire to maintain friendship with Arab and Muslim-majority countries. Iran under the Shah, however, maintained covert and functional relations with Israel and was aligned with Western strategic interests. This difference contributed to the ideological distance between India and Iran during the pre-1979 period.

Energy was another crucial factor. India's developmental needs required reliable access to oil, and West Asia was the world's central hydrocarbon region. Although India's energy dependence was not as large in the early decades as it later became, the importance of West Asian oil was already evident. Iran, as a major oil-producing country, naturally occupied an important place in India's energy imagination. However, sanctions did not dominate this period as they would after 1979; rather, the main challenge was political alignment and regional competition.

India's approach toward West Asia also had to consider Pakistan. Pakistan frequently attempted to use Islamic identity to mobilize support from Muslim-majority countries against India, particularly on Kashmir. India's diplomacy therefore tried to prevent the internationalization of Kashmir through Islamic forums and bilateral persuasion. India's secular identity and its large Muslim population gave it a strong basis for engagement with West Asia. New Delhi emphasized that India's relations with West Asian countries were based on history, culture, trade and mutual respect, not religious bloc politics.

Within this broader approach, Iran occupied a special but complicated position. Iran was not an Arab country; it was a Persian civilizational state. It was Muslim-majority but not part of Arab nationalism. It was geographically close to the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Central Asia. It had historical ties with India, especially through Persian language and culture. Yet its pro-Western orientation and relations with Pakistan complicated India's engagement. Therefore, India's early approach to Iran was marked by *courteous caution*.

India did not allow its Arab policy to erase Iran's importance. Nehru visited Iran in 1959, and earlier the Shah had visited India in 1956. These exchanges indicated that both sides wished to maintain formal friendship despite Cold War differences. Later, Indira Gandhi's visit to Iran in 1974 and the Shah's visit to India in 1978 suggested that the relationship gained greater warmth in the 1970s. This was partly due to Iran's rising economic power after the oil boom and India's growing need to diversify West Asian relations.

India's West Asia policy was therefore not one-dimensional. It was a careful balancing act between Arab nationalism, Iran's strategic importance, Gulf energy, Pakistan's diplomacy, Palestine, superpower rivalry and India's own non-aligned identity. India could not afford to ignore Iran, but neither could it fully align with the Shah's pro-Western regional vision. The result was a policy of *measured engagement*.

The significance of India's West Asia approach lies in its realism beneath idealist language. India spoke of anti-colonialism, peace and solidarity, but it also pursued oil, trade, diplomatic support and strategic space. This combination of normative vocabulary and national interest would later become even more pronounced in India's post-Cold War West Asia policy. During 1947–1979, however, the foundations were already visible.

3.1.3 India's Early Policy Towards Iran

India's early policy towards Iran was shaped by a combination of civilizational respect, diplomatic caution and geopolitical calculation. India recognized Iran as an ancient civilization with which the subcontinent had shared deep historical ties. Persian language, Indo-Persian literature, Sufi culture, trade routes, Parsi migration and cultural exchange had created a powerful historical memory. Yet modern policy could not be based on history alone. The newly independent Indian state had to assess Iran's role in the Cold War, its proximity to Pakistan, its alignment with the West, and its position in the Persian Gulf.

The signing of the Treaty of Friendship on 15 March 1950 was the formal beginning of modern India–Iran relations. This treaty expressed mutual respect, peaceful relations and diplomatic recognition. It demonstrated that India intended to preserve historical goodwill in a modern institutional form. The treaty also showed that India did not wish to allow ideological differences to obstruct bilateral contact. In diplomatic terms, it was an act of *foundational reassurance*.

However, the relationship remained limited during the 1950s because of divergent alignments. Iran's increasing association with Western military arrangements created discomfort in India. The Baghdad Pact of 1955 and later CENTO were viewed by India as instruments of Cold War militarization. Since Pakistan was also part of Western-sponsored security arrangements, India feared that such alliances could strengthen Pakistan militarily and diplomatically. Iran's closeness to Pakistan therefore affected Indian perceptions.

India's early policy toward Iran was also influenced by its wider preference for Asian solidarity. Nehru believed that Asian countries should avoid becoming instruments of great-power rivalry. Iran's pro-Western alignment seemed inconsistent with this vision. Yet Nehru did not adopt a hostile approach. His 1959 visit to Iran reflected India's desire to sustain dialogue. Nehru's diplomacy was often marked by the belief that historical civilizations should not be permanently divided by temporary alignments.

In the 1960s, India–Iran relations slowly improved, though they did not become strategically intimate. The 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1965 India–Pakistan War altered India's security environment. Iran's sympathy toward

Pakistan during India–Pakistan tensions remained a source of concern. However, Iran also began to recognize India’s size and regional importance. India, meanwhile, recognized that Iran’s oil wealth and Persian Gulf location would become increasingly important for future policy.

The 1971 Bangladesh War was another significant moment. Iran, under the Shah, maintained friendly relations with Pakistan and was cautious toward India’s role in the crisis. India’s decisive victory and the creation of Bangladesh transformed South Asian geopolitics. It established India as the dominant power in South Asia. After 1971, Iran had to reassess India’s regional stature. The Shah’s government increasingly understood that India could not be treated merely through the lens of Pakistan.

The 1970s brought greater warmth. Indira Gandhi’s visit to Iran in 1974 occurred in a period when Iran had gained immense financial power due to the oil boom. Iran was modernizing rapidly, purchasing advanced military equipment and projecting itself as a leading regional power. India, facing developmental and energy needs, saw value in improving relations with Tehran. Prime Minister Morarji Desai’s visit in 1977 and the Shah’s visit to India in 1978 further demonstrated a late pre-revolutionary improvement in bilateral relations.

India’s early Iran policy may therefore be divided into three phases. The first phase, from 1947 to the mid-1950s, was one of formal establishment and cautious goodwill. The second phase, from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, was marked by Cold War distance due to Iran’s Western alignment and Pakistan factor. The third phase, during the 1970s, witnessed gradual improvement driven by energy, regional realism and high-level visits.

This policy reveals India’s diplomatic maturity. India did not allow Iran’s pro-Western policy to eliminate bilateral relations. Nor did India abandon its opposition to military blocs merely to please Iran. Instead, India followed a policy of *calibrated continuity*. It preserved historical links, maintained official contact, avoided unnecessary provocation, and waited for structural conditions to improve. This patient approach helped ensure that after the 1979 Revolution, India had enough diplomatic foundation to engage the new Islamic Republic.

3.2 Iran Under the Shah

Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was one of the most important pro-Western states in West Asia during the Cold War. The Shah ruled from 1941 to 1979, but his authority became far more consolidated after the 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Thereafter, Iran became closely aligned with the United States, received substantial military assistance, expanded its oil-based economy, modernized rapidly, and positioned itself as a regional pillar of Western strategy. Yet the same period also witnessed authoritarianism, social inequality, political repression, cultural Westernization, and growing popular resentment that ultimately culminated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The Shah's Iran was a state of paradox. It was externally powerful but internally fragile; modernizing but authoritarian; wealthy from oil but unequal in distribution; nationalistic in rhetoric but dependent on Western support; ambitious in regional policy but vulnerable to domestic legitimacy crises. This paradox deeply affected Iran's relations with India. India admired Iran's civilizational importance and recognized its strategic value, but it was cautious about Iran's pro-Western orientation and its closeness to Pakistan. Thus, India–Iran relations under the Shah remained cordial but limited.

3.2.1 Iran's Pro-Western Foreign Policy

Iran's pro-Western foreign policy under the Shah emerged from geography, regime interest, fear of communism, oil politics and American strategic planning. Iran bordered the Soviet Union and occupied a crucial position between the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, the Caucasus and South Asia. During the Cold War, this geography made Iran extremely important to Western containment strategy. The United States and Britain viewed Iran as a barrier against Soviet expansion toward the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

The 1953 coup was a decisive turning point. Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh had nationalized Iran's oil industry, challenging British oil interests and asserting Iranian economic sovereignty. His overthrow, supported by the United States and Britain, restored the Shah's authority and tied Iran more closely to the Western camp. After 1953, the Shah increasingly relied on American support for security, intelligence, military modernization and regime survival. This produced a foreign policy that was outwardly nationalist but structurally Western-oriented.

Iran joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955, later associated with CENTO after Iraq's withdrawal. This security alignment placed Iran in a Western-sponsored anti-Soviet regional framework alongside Turkey, Pakistan and the United Kingdom. For India, this was problematic. India opposed military blocs and saw such alliances as dangerous instruments of Cold War polarization. Moreover, Pakistan's presence in the same security network made India suspicious. Iran's pro-Western foreign policy therefore created a strategic distance between Tehran and New Delhi.

The Shah's foreign policy was also shaped by his ambition to make Iran the leading power of the Persian Gulf. After Britain announced its withdrawal from east of Suez, Iran sought to fill the regional security vacuum. The Shah developed a powerful military, purchased advanced weapons, and projected Iran as the guardian of Gulf stability. This role was welcomed by the United States, which saw Iran as a regional surrogate capable of protecting Western interests. The Nixon Doctrine further strengthened this logic by encouraging regional allies to assume greater security responsibilities.

Iran's pro-Western orientation also involved close relations with Israel, though often in discreet forms. This complicated Iran's image among Arab nationalist states. India, which supported the Palestinian cause and maintained close relations with Arab countries, had to be careful in dealing with Iran. New Delhi did not want its Iran policy to undermine its Arab diplomacy. Therefore, India's engagement with the Shah's Iran remained measured.

Economically, the Shah used oil wealth to modernize Iran and expand its global profile. The oil boom after 1973 gave Iran enormous revenues. These revenues financed infrastructure, industrialization, education, military expansion and ambitious state-led modernization. Iran became a major buyer of Western arms and technology. The Shah envisioned Iran as a great modern power, a bridge between East and West, and a leading force in the Gulf. Yet this modernization was deeply dependent on Western capital, expertise and strategic approval.

The Shah's pro-Western policy also contained a civilizational contradiction. He celebrated Iran's ancient Persian identity and sought to project national greatness, but his close association with Western powers created perceptions of dependency. Many Iranians saw the regime as insufficiently sovereign, especially because of the memory of 1953. Religious leaders, leftists,

nationalists and intellectuals criticized the Shah for authoritarianism, Westernization and subordination to foreign interests. Thus, foreign policy became linked to domestic legitimacy.

For India, Iran's pro-Western policy required diplomatic caution. India could not fully embrace Iran's alliance politics, but it also could not ignore Iran's importance. New Delhi therefore maintained relations without joining Tehran's strategic worldview. This was classic Indian *non-aligned pragmatism*. India engaged the Shah's Iran as a significant regional state while preserving its own independent posture.

3.2.2 Iran's Relations With the United States

Iran's relations with the United States under the Shah were among the most consequential bilateral relationships in Cold War West Asia. The relationship deepened after the 1953 coup and became one of the pillars of American strategy in the Middle East. Washington viewed Iran as a vital anti-Soviet ally, a major oil producer, a guardian of Persian Gulf stability, and a regional power capable of supporting Western interests. The Shah viewed the United States as a source of military protection, political legitimacy, economic modernization and technological advancement.

The 1953 coup created the psychological foundation of the relationship, but also planted the seeds of future resentment. For the Shah, American support restored and secured his throne. For many Iranian nationalists, the same event represented foreign interference against a democratically supported nationalist leader. This dual memory remained central to Iranian politics. While the monarchy benefited from American support, its legitimacy was simultaneously damaged by the perception that it owed its survival to foreign intervention.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States provided Iran with military aid, economic assistance and security cooperation. American advisers helped strengthen Iran's armed forces and security apparatus. Iran became part of the Western containment system against the Soviet Union. American policymakers viewed Iran's stability as essential because of its oil resources and its border with the Soviet Union. In strategic terms, Iran was a *frontline state*.

The relationship intensified during the 1970s. The Nixon Doctrine allowed friendly regional powers to assume greater responsibility for local security.

Iran, with its oil wealth and pro-American ruler, became an ideal candidate. The Shah purchased massive quantities of advanced American weapons, including aircraft, naval equipment and sophisticated military systems. Iran became one of the largest purchasers of U.S. arms. This military modernization was meant to make Iran the dominant power in the Persian Gulf.

Oil was central to U.S.–Iran relations. Iran’s petroleum resources gave it immense economic and strategic importance. After the 1973 oil price rise, Iran’s revenues increased dramatically, enabling the Shah to accelerate modernization and arms purchases. However, oil wealth also created inflation, inequality, administrative overreach and social dislocation. The state expanded faster than society could absorb. Economic modernization without political liberalization generated resentment.

The United States also viewed Iran as a stabilizing force in the Gulf. After Britain’s withdrawal from the region, Washington relied on Iran and Saudi Arabia as twin pillars of Gulf security. Iran’s military expansion, therefore, was not seen merely as national ambition; it was part of American regional strategy. The Shah considered himself the guardian of order against communism, Arab radicalism and revolutionary instability.

Yet the closeness between Iran and the United States increasingly alienated sections of Iranian society. Religious leaders criticized Western cultural influence. Nationalists resented foreign domination. Leftists condemned imperialism and capitalism. Intellectuals attacked authoritarian modernization. The SAVAK security apparatus, associated with repression and often linked in public imagination to Western support, became a symbol of fear. Thus, the U.S.–Iran alliance created strategic strength but political vulnerability.

For India, Iran’s closeness to the United States had direct implications. India’s own relations with Washington were often complicated, especially after the 1971 Bangladesh crisis, when the United States tilted toward Pakistan. Iran’s pro-American and pro-Pakistan leanings made New Delhi cautious. However, India did not allow this to become permanent hostility. It continued diplomatic exchanges because it recognized Iran’s long-term importance.

The U.S.–Iran relationship under the Shah therefore shaped India–Iran relations indirectly but powerfully. It placed Iran in a different strategic camp from India, restricted the depth of bilateral cooperation, and connected Tehran’s policies with Washington’s Cold War priorities. Yet it also made Iran a regionally powerful state whose friendship remained valuable. India’s challenge was to engage Iran without compromising non-alignment. This required sophisticated diplomatic balance.

3.2.3 Iran’s Role in Cold War Politics

Iran’s role in Cold War politics was determined by its geography, oil wealth, anti-Soviet alignment and regional ambition. Situated along the southern border of the Soviet Union and close to the Persian Gulf, Iran was one of the most strategically significant countries in the American containment system. Western strategists feared that Soviet influence in Iran could open the way to the Persian Gulf and threaten global oil supplies. Therefore, Iran became a geopolitical frontier of the Cold War.

Iran’s location made it a bridge and barrier simultaneously. It was a bridge between the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and the Caucasus. It was a barrier against Soviet movement toward warm waters. This dual role gave Iran extraordinary strategic value. The Shah understood this and used Iran’s geopolitical importance to secure American support, military equipment and diplomatic recognition. He presented Iran as a stable, modernizing and anti-communist monarchy capable of defending Western interests in a volatile region.

CENTO represented the institutional expression of Iran’s Cold War role. Along with Turkey, Pakistan and the United Kingdom, Iran participated in a regional security system intended to contain Soviet influence. Although CENTO never became as militarily effective as NATO, it symbolized Iran’s alignment with Western strategy. For India, CENTO was problematic because it included Pakistan and represented the bloc politics that India opposed. This difference was one of the main reasons why India–Iran relations remained limited during the Shah’s era.

Iran also played a role in regional conflicts and balance-of-power politics. The Shah supported conservative and pro-Western forces against radical Arab nationalism and leftist movements. Iran competed with Iraq, especially after the rise of Ba’athist politics. It asserted influence in the Persian Gulf and

sought to prevent revolutionary or Soviet-backed movements from threatening monarchical order. The Shah's Iran therefore acted as a *counter-revolutionary regional power*.

After the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, Iran increased its military and political role. The occupation of the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in 1971, disputed by Arab states, reflected Iran's determination to assert control in the Gulf. Iran also intervened indirectly in regional affairs, including support against leftist movements in Oman. These actions showed that Iran was not merely a passive ally of the West; it was an ambitious regional actor using Western support to advance its own strategic agenda.

Iran's oil wealth intensified its Cold War importance. Oil was not only an economic resource; it was a geopolitical weapon and strategic commodity. Western economies depended heavily on Persian Gulf energy. Iran's stability was therefore considered essential for global capitalism and Western security. The Shah's regime benefited from this importance, but the same oil wealth created domestic contradictions. Rapid modernization, high military expenditure, inflation and inequality intensified social tensions.

Iran's Cold War role also affected its relations with the Soviet Union. Although Iran was aligned with the West, it maintained some economic and diplomatic contact with Moscow. The Shah was careful not to provoke the Soviet Union unnecessarily. This showed that even pro-Western Iran practiced a limited form of strategic balancing. However, its primary orientation remained firmly Western.

India viewed Iran's Cold War role through the prism of non-alignment and regional security. India opposed military blocs, disliked Pakistan's participation in Western alliances, and maintained friendly relations with the Soviet Union. Therefore, Iran's Cold War alignment limited political intimacy. Yet India also recognized Iran's sovereignty and regional importance. New Delhi did not treat Tehran as a mere Western puppet; it understood that Iran had its own history, ambitions and anxieties.

By the late 1970s, Iran's Cold War role began to collapse under domestic pressure. The very factors that made the Shah powerful internationally—oil wealth, military expansion, Western support and centralized modernization—contributed to his vulnerability internally. The monarchy appeared externally

strong but socially alienated. Opposition forces from religious, nationalist, liberal and leftist backgrounds converged against the regime. The 1979 Revolution ended Iran's pro-Western monarchy and transformed the geopolitical landscape of West Asia.

In conclusion, Iran's role in Cold War politics profoundly influenced India–Iran relations from 1947 to 1979. Iran's Western alignment, CENTO membership, U.S. partnership, Pakistan connection and Gulf ambitions created distance from non-aligned India. Yet civilizational memory, diplomatic prudence and strategic awareness preserved bilateral contact. The period was not one of deep partnership, but it was one of foundational engagement. It established the institutional basis upon which post-1979 India–Iran relations would later be rebuilt under entirely different ideological and geopolitical circumstances.

3.3 Limitations in India–Iran Relations During the Cold War

The limitations in India–Iran relations during the Cold War were not produced by civilizational hostility or cultural estrangement; rather, they emerged from the *structural compulsions of bipolar world politics*. India and Iran possessed deep historical associations, but after 1947 they entered the modern international order through divergent strategic pathways. India chose *non-alignment*, anti-colonial solidarity and independent decision-making, while Iran under the Shah gradually became one of the principal pro-Western pillars of the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle Eastern security system. This difference created an atmosphere of cordiality without intimacy, diplomacy without strategic depth, and cultural sympathy without political convergence.

The Cold War international system divided the world into antagonistic ideological and military blocs. Newly independent states had to decide whether they would join one of these blocs, resist bloc politics, or manoeuvre between them. India resisted military alignment because it believed that alliance politics would compromise sovereignty and intensify global conflict. Iran, by contrast, feared Soviet expansion, internal communist influence and regional instability, and therefore sought security through Western-backed arrangements. The consequence was a relationship marked by *asymmetrical strategic imagination*: India viewed military blocs as dangerous; Iran viewed them as protective.

Another major limitation was the *Pakistan factor*. Pakistan's early alignment with the United States, its participation in Western-sponsored alliances, and its close relations with Iran placed Tehran and Islamabad within the same strategic network. India, already engaged in serious disputes with Pakistan over Kashmir and later affected by wars in 1965 and 1971, naturally viewed Iran's closeness to Pakistan with concern. Iran did not always see South Asian issues through Indian eyes; India could not ignore the possibility that Pakistan might use its relations with Iran to strengthen its diplomatic and military position. Thus, even when India and Iran desired cordial relations, Pakistan operated as an intervening variable.

Economic and strategic cooperation also remained limited because the two states were not yet embedded in the kind of connectivity, energy and security frameworks that would become important after the Cold War. Iran's oil wealth was significant, but India's energy dependence had not yet reached the scale it would later attain. The idea of Chabahar, the International North–South Transport Corridor, Afghanistan connectivity, and Central Asian access had not yet become central to bilateral diplomacy. Trade existed, but it did not generate a transformational economic partnership. Strategic cooperation remained cautious because both countries were situated within different security cultures.

Thus, the Cold War limitations were multidimensional. They included different alignments, the Pakistan factor, modest economic relations, weak institutional mechanisms, absence of major connectivity projects, and divergent perceptions of global order. Yet these limitations should not be interpreted as complete failure. They were the limitations of an age in which international politics was heavily conditioned by superpower rivalry. India and Iran preserved formal diplomatic relations, exchanged visits, maintained cultural contacts and avoided permanent rupture. This capacity for *restrained continuity* later allowed the relationship to recover and expand in the post-1979 and post-Cold War periods.

3.3.1 Different Strategic Alignments

The most fundamental limitation in India–Iran relations during the Cold War was the difference in their strategic alignments. India adopted *non-alignment* as the central principle of its foreign policy, while Iran under the Shah became closely associated with the Western security system. India's non-alignment

was not a doctrine of weakness; it was a deliberate attempt to preserve *diplomatic sovereignty* and prevent the newly independent country from becoming an instrument of great-power rivalry. Iran's Western alignment, on the other hand, was motivated by fear of Soviet expansion, concern over domestic communist activity, desire for military modernization, and the Shah's ambition to make Iran a leading regional power.

India's strategic outlook after independence was shaped by its colonial experience. Having suffered from imperial domination, India rejected the idea that newly independent states should surrender their foreign-policy judgment to external blocs. Jawaharlal Nehru believed that peace, anti-colonialism, disarmament, Asian-African solidarity and independent judgment should guide India's conduct. Therefore, India refused to join the American-led security system despite pressure and incentives. This position gave India moral prestige among many postcolonial countries, but it also created tensions with states that joined Western alliances.

Iran's strategic orientation followed a different path. After the 1953 coup, the Shah became increasingly dependent on the United States and other Western powers for political support, military equipment and regime security. Iran's location along the southern frontier of the Soviet Union made it a major concern for Western containment strategy. The Shah viewed the Soviet Union as a potential threat and regarded Western partnership as essential for Iran's security and modernization. Therefore, Iran joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955, which later became associated with the Central Treaty Organization. This placed Iran firmly within a Western-backed security arrangement.

India viewed such military alliances with suspicion. New Delhi believed that the Baghdad Pact and CENTO would not produce genuine regional security; rather, they would intensify Cold War polarization and militarize Asia. India also feared that these alliances would strengthen Pakistan, which was already India's principal adversary in South Asia. Since Iran and Pakistan were both associated with the same Western security structure, India found it difficult to develop deep strategic confidence with Tehran. The problem was not Iranian civilization or Iranian society; the problem was Iran's placement within a bloc that India considered injurious to Asian autonomy.

The divergence in strategic alignment also influenced diplomatic perceptions. Iran, from its pro-Western standpoint, viewed India's closeness to the Soviet Union with caution, especially after India's defence relationship with

Moscow deepened in the 1960s and 1970s. India, from its non-aligned standpoint, viewed Iran's American dependence with discomfort. Each country saw the other through the prism of its own security anxiety. This created *perceptual distance* even when official language remained courteous.

The difference became sharper because India's non-alignment was not merely a geopolitical technique; it was also connected to anti-colonial moral politics. India supported Arab nationalism, opposed colonial intervention during the Suez Crisis, and advocated Palestinian rights. Iran under the Shah, however, was suspicious of radical Arab nationalism, maintained close ties with the United States, and developed discreet relations with Israel. These differences placed India and Iran on different sides of several West Asian debates. Thus, strategic divergence was reinforced by ideological and regional-policy divergence.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to describe India and Iran as enemies during this period. India's non-alignment gave it flexibility to engage countries across ideological divisions. Iran's pro-Western orientation did not prevent it from valuing India's civilizational prestige and Asian importance. The two countries maintained diplomatic relations and continued high-level contact. This indicates that *different alignments constrained the relationship but did not annihilate it*. India and Iran understood that Cold War alignments were important, but not sufficient to erase centuries of civilizational familiarity.

In scholarly interpretation, this phase may be described as one of *limited convergence under structural divergence*. India and Iran were not strategically close, but neither were they structurally hostile. Their relationship existed in a middle zone, defined by caution, courtesy, symbolic respect and selective engagement. This diplomatic middle zone later proved useful because it preserved communication channels for future cooperation.

3.3.2 Pakistan Factor

The Pakistan factor was one of the most sensitive limitations in India–Iran relations during the Cold War. Pakistan's creation in 1947 transformed the geography of India's relations with Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Before Partition, the Indian subcontinent had a more direct north-western orientation toward Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia through regions that later became part of Pakistan. After Partition, independent India lost direct

land access to this strategic space. Pakistan stood geographically between India and the continental routes leading to Iran, Afghanistan and beyond. Thus, Pakistan became not only a political adversary but also a *geographical obstruction* in India's westward strategy.

Pakistan's early foreign policy was marked by a search for security against India. Rather than adopting non-alignment, Pakistan joined Western-sponsored military arrangements, including SEATO and the Baghdad Pact/CENTO framework. Pakistan's objective was not merely anti-communist containment; it sought military assistance, diplomatic support and strategic leverage against India. This created anxiety in New Delhi because Western military aid to Pakistan could be used in South Asian conflicts rather than against communism. Iran's association with Pakistan in the same Cold War security architecture created additional concern for India.

Iran and Pakistan developed close ties in the 1950s and 1960s. Both were Muslim-majority states, both were linked to Western security structures, and both shared concern about communism. Iran's ruling elite often viewed Pakistan as a friendly regional partner. For India, this closeness complicated the diplomatic environment. India feared that Iran might support Pakistan diplomatically in India–Pakistan disputes or at least remain sympathetic to Islamabad. The Kashmir issue, the 1965 war and the 1971 Bangladesh crisis all gave the Pakistan factor sharp relevance.

During the 1965 India–Pakistan War, Iran's sympathy for Pakistan generated Indian discomfort. Although Iran did not become a direct military adversary of India, its political and emotional alignment was not fully neutral from India's perspective. India saw such sympathy as part of the larger pattern of Islamic and Western-backed support that Pakistan tried to mobilize. This reinforced Indian caution toward Iran. For New Delhi, friendship with Tehran could not be separated from Tehran's attitude toward Islamabad.

The 1971 Bangladesh crisis further complicated perceptions. India supported the liberation struggle in East Pakistan and eventually intervened militarily after massive refugee inflows and Pakistan's military repression. Iran, under the Shah, maintained close relations with Pakistan and was uneasy about India's role. The creation of Bangladesh dramatically altered South Asian geopolitics and established India as the predominant regional power. After this event, Iran had to reassess India's stature, but the memory of Iranian closeness to Pakistan remained a limitation.

The Pakistan factor was not only political; it was also strategic and cartographic. Because Pakistan blocked India's overland access to Afghanistan and Iran, India could not easily convert its historical relations with Iran into practical connectivity. The absence of direct transit limited trade, people-to-people movement and strategic cooperation. In later decades, Chabahar would emerge precisely as an answer to this problem. But during the Cold War period, India lacked such an operational alternative. Therefore, Pakistan's geography functioned as an *interdicting space* between India and Iran.

Iran's own policy toward Pakistan was also shaped by its regional anxieties. Iran shared a border with Pakistan and had concerns regarding Baluchistan, border management and regional stability. Tehran did not wish to alienate Islamabad unnecessarily. Therefore, even when Iran recognized India's importance, it tended to maintain a careful balance. This produced limitations in India–Iran political trust. India wanted Iran to appreciate its security concerns regarding Pakistan; Iran wanted to preserve its relations with both South Asian states.

The Pakistan factor also influenced perceptions in multilateral and Islamic forums. Pakistan often tried to present disputes with India, particularly Kashmir, in religious terms. India rejected this framing and emphasized its secular constitutional identity, plural society and sovereign rights. Iran's position, though not always identical to Pakistan's, had to be watched carefully by India. The presence of a large Shia population in India and the historical Indo-Persian connection gave India grounds for engagement, but Pakistan's diplomatic activism remained a complication.

Nevertheless, the Pakistan factor did not completely prevent India–Iran engagement. India continued to maintain formal relations with Iran, and high-level visits took place. Iran also understood that India was too large and historically significant to be ignored. Over time, especially after India's 1971 victory and Iran's growing oil wealth, both countries showed signs of improved engagement. Yet the Pakistan factor remained a persistent limitation throughout the Shah era.

In analytical terms, Pakistan functioned as a *strategic filter* through which India and Iran often viewed each other. It distorted perceptions, reduced trust and limited cooperation. However, it also indirectly demonstrated why Iran mattered so much to India. Because Pakistan blocked India's land access, Iran

eventually became indispensable as an alternative route. Thus, the very factor that limited India–Iran relations during the Cold War later increased Iran’s strategic importance in India’s post-Cold War connectivity policy.

3.3.3 Limited Economic and Strategic Cooperation

Economic and strategic cooperation between India and Iran during the Cold War remained limited when compared with the potential created by their geography and history. The two countries possessed complementary capacities: India had a large population, developmental needs, civilizational ties and a growing industrial base; Iran had oil resources, strategic location and financial strength, especially after the 1973 oil boom. Yet these complementarities did not mature into a deep economic partnership during the 1947–1979 period. The reason lay in political alignment, infrastructural limitations, modest trade mechanisms, and the absence of a shared regional connectivity strategy.

In the early decades after independence, India’s economy was inward-looking and developmental in orientation. It followed a mixed economy model, emphasized public-sector planning, import substitution and self-reliant industrialization. Iran under the Shah, especially after the oil boom, followed a state-led modernization programme financed by petroleum revenues and heavily supported by Western technology and capital. Although both countries were engaged in modernization, their economic structures and external orientations differed. India’s economic links were diversified but cautious; Iran’s modernization was increasingly Western-connected and oil-driven.

Energy cooperation existed as a possibility, but it did not assume the centrality it would later acquire. India’s oil needs were growing, but the scale of dependence on Gulf hydrocarbons had not yet reached the intensity seen in later decades. Iran was a major oil producer, but India’s energy diplomacy was still in an early stage. Moreover, oil trade during the Shah era was embedded in global oil-company structures and Western-dominated commercial systems. The two countries did not yet develop the kind of strategic energy dialogue that became important in later periods.

Trade between India and Iran remained modest. Indian exports included commodities such as tea, textiles, engineering goods and agricultural products, while imports from Iran included petroleum-related products, dry

fruits and other goods. However, transport constraints, limited shipping arrangements, lack of major institutional frameworks and political caution prevented trade from expanding dramatically. The absence of strong banking, investment and industrial cooperation kept the economic relationship below its natural potential.

Strategic cooperation was even more limited. Iran's security architecture was tied to the United States, Britain and Western-aligned regional frameworks. India's security partnerships increasingly included the Soviet Union, especially after the 1962 war with China and the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. These different security linkages made defence or strategic cooperation between India and Iran difficult. Iran could not easily align with India's non-aligned but Soviet-friendly security posture; India could not easily cooperate strategically with a country closely tied to Western and Pakistani security networks.

The absence of major connectivity projects also limited strategic cooperation. During the Cold War, there was no operational Chabahar framework, no developed International North–South Transport Corridor, and no systematic India–Iran–Afghanistan connectivity policy. Afghanistan itself remained a space of monarchy, later republican transformation and then instability after the 1978 Saur Revolution and Soviet intervention. The broader geography that would later make Iran indispensable to India's Central Asian outreach had not yet been converted into practical policy. Thus, geography existed, but strategy had not yet operationalized it.

Limited cooperation also resulted from mutual caution. India did not want to alienate Arab states or appear too close to a pro-Western monarchy. Iran did not want to weaken its relations with Pakistan or Western patrons by moving too close to India. Each side saw value in the other, but neither was prepared to make the relationship a central pillar of foreign policy. This produced a relationship of *low-intensity engagement*.

The domestic priorities of both countries further constrained cooperation. India was preoccupied with nation-building, food security, industrialization, wars with Pakistan and China, political consolidation and development. Iran was preoccupied with monarchical modernization, internal security, oil revenue management, military expansion and regime legitimacy. Neither country had the institutional energy to build an ambitious bilateral strategic architecture. The relationship remained important but not urgent.

Yet the limits of economic and strategic cooperation should not obscure the fact that the two countries preserved a foundation for future engagement. Trade existed, diplomatic missions functioned, cultural contacts continued and high-level visits occurred. These limited forms of cooperation kept the relationship alive. They created a diplomatic memory that later generations could expand. In this sense, the Cold War period was not a lost era; it was a preparatory era of *modest institutional continuity*.

Thus, economic and strategic cooperation remained limited because of divergent alignments, Pakistan's role, underdeveloped connectivity, modest energy interdependence, weak institutional frameworks and domestic priorities. However, the potential remained visible. The later expansion of India–Iran cooperation after the Cold War was possible precisely because the earlier relationship had not been allowed to decay completely.

3.4 Diplomatic Engagement Despite Differences

Despite the limitations imposed by Cold War politics, India and Iran maintained diplomatic engagement. This engagement was not spectacular, but it was significant because it prevented disagreement from becoming estrangement. Both countries understood that historical ties, civilizational memory and geographical realities demanded continued contact. India's diplomacy toward Iran was based on *prudent continuity*, while Iran's approach toward India was shaped by recognition of India's size, culture and growing regional importance.

Diplomatic engagement during this period took several forms. The most important was the establishment of formal relations through the 1950 Treaty of Friendship. High-level visits followed at different moments: the Shah visited India in the 1950s and again in the late 1970s; Nehru visited Iran; Indira Gandhi visited Iran in 1974; and Morarji Desai visited Iran in 1977. These visits did not create a strategic alliance, but they demonstrated that both governments wanted to preserve channels of dialogue. In diplomacy, continuity itself can be a form of achievement.

Cultural cooperation provided another stabilizing force. Even when political alignment differed, India and Iran could draw upon their civilizational ties. Persian language, Indo-Persian literature, Sufi traditions, Parsi heritage, architecture, poetry and historical memory created an atmosphere of mutual respect. Cultural cooperation acted as a bridge over political distance. It

reminded both governments that temporary Cold War alignments should not erase permanent civilizational linkages.

Early trade relations also supported engagement. Though limited, trade helped maintain practical contact. Economic exchange created constituencies interested in stability. Commercial relations did not transform the bilateral relationship during this period, but they prevented it from becoming purely symbolic. Trade, diplomacy and culture together formed a modest but meaningful framework of India–Iran interaction before the 1979 Revolution.

3.4.1 Formal Diplomatic Relations

Formal diplomatic relations between independent India and Iran began with the Treaty of Friendship signed on 15 March 1950. This treaty provided the institutional foundation for modern bilateral relations. Its importance lies not merely in its legal form but in its symbolic meaning. It represented the willingness of two ancient civilizations to engage each other as modern sovereign states. It transformed historical familiarity into diplomatic recognition and gave the relationship a formal architecture.

The 1950 treaty reflected India's broader diplomatic practice after independence. India sought friendly relations with all countries, avoided unnecessary hostility, and emphasized peaceful coexistence. Iran, under the Shah, also valued formal friendship with India because India was a major Asian state with historical prestige. The treaty therefore served as a *diplomatic anchor* during a period when Cold War currents could easily have pushed the two countries apart.

High-level visits helped sustain the relationship. The Shah's visit to India in the 1950s and Nehru's visit to Iran in 1959 indicated early attempts at mutual understanding. These visits carried symbolic weight because they occurred despite strategic divergence. They conveyed that India and Iran were willing to engage at the highest political level without requiring complete ideological agreement. This is an important principle in diplomacy: states can maintain relations even when their global alignments differ.

In the 1960s, formal relations continued but remained cautious. India's wars with China and Pakistan, Iran's alignment with the West, and Pakistan's proximity to Tehran limited the scope of political intimacy. Nevertheless, embassies, diplomatic correspondence and official communication remained

active. This continuity was valuable because it ensured that misunderstandings could be managed through dialogue. In international relations, the absence of dialogue often deepens suspicion; India and Iran avoided that danger.

The 1970s brought renewed high-level engagement. Indira Gandhi's visit to Iran in 1974 came at a time when Iran had become financially powerful due to oil revenues and India was reassessing its West Asian diplomacy after the 1971 transformation of South Asia. Morarji Desai's visit in 1977 and the Shah's visit to India in 1978 further indicated that the relationship was warming before the Iranian Revolution. These exchanges suggested that both countries had begun to see each other beyond earlier Cold War stereotypes.

Formal diplomatic relations also allowed India and Iran to maintain contact on regional issues. Although they did not always agree, they could discuss developments in South Asia, West Asia and the Indian Ocean. India could explain its concerns regarding Pakistan; Iran could communicate its anxieties regarding regional security and communism. Diplomatic contact did not remove differences, but it civilized them. It transformed potential mistrust into manageable disagreement.

The significance of formal relations also lies in their durability. Many relationships in the Cold War became sharply polarized, but India and Iran avoided such polarization. India did not sever relations with Iran because of its Western alignment. Iran did not abandon relations with India because of India's non-alignment and Soviet friendship. Both sides practiced a measure of *diplomatic restraint*. This restraint became the basis for post-1979 engagement with the Islamic Republic.

Formal diplomatic relations from 1947 to 1979 therefore must be understood as a quiet but important achievement. They did not produce a grand strategic partnership, but they preserved mutual recognition, political communication and institutional continuity. In the long history of India–Iran relations, this period served as the bridge between civilizational memory and post-revolutionary diplomacy.

3.4.2 Cultural Cooperation

Cultural cooperation between India and Iran during the Cold War period served as a vital source of continuity. Political differences could limit strategic cooperation, but they could not erase the profound Indo-Persian

heritage that had developed over centuries. Persian language, Sufi traditions, Indo-Persian literature, architecture, painting, music, Parsi history and shared historical memory continued to provide a foundation for mutual respect. Culture functioned as a *civilizational safety valve* in a relationship otherwise constrained by geopolitics.

India's cultural memory of Iran was deeply embedded in its historical institutions and social life. Persian had been the language of Indian courts for centuries, and Persianate influence remained visible in Indian languages, poetry, etiquette, cuisine and monuments. Mughal architecture, Urdu poetry, Sufi shrines and Persian manuscripts preserved the Iranian imprint in Indian civilization. Therefore, Indian engagement with Iran was never entirely foreign; it was partly an engagement with a component of India's own historical personality.

Iran also retained an awareness of India as a culturally significant civilization. Indian philosophy, literature, spiritual traditions and historical connections were known in Persian intellectual circles. The movement of Indian texts into Persian translation during earlier centuries had created a memory of India as a land of wisdom, spirituality and intellectual richness. This cultural image survived into the modern period, even though political relations were conditioned by Cold War pressures.

Academic exchanges and literary interest helped sustain cultural relations. Persian studies in Indian universities, manuscript collections, Urdu-Persian literary traditions and Indological curiosity in Iran created intellectual bridges. Scholars, poets, cultural delegations and educational institutions played a role in keeping alive the Indo-Iranian connection. Such cooperation did not always receive dramatic political attention, but it created a long-term reservoir of goodwill.

The Parsi community in India represented one of the strongest living symbols of cultural cooperation. The Parsis preserved their Zoroastrian heritage after migration from Iran and became deeply integrated into Indian society. Their achievements in business, industry, philanthropy, law, science, education and public life made them a distinguished community in modern India. Their presence reminded both countries of a humane historical bond based on refuge, continuity and contribution. This community served as a living bridge between Iran's ancient religious heritage and India's plural civilizational ethos.

Sufism also remained a cultural bridge. Persian Sufi poetry and metaphysics had shaped Indian devotional traditions, and Sufi shrines in India continued to preserve Persianate vocabulary, music and spiritual imagination. The works of Rumi, Hafez, Saadi and other Persian masters were admired by Indian scholars and literary circles. This mystical heritage gave India–Iran cultural relations a moral and emotional depth beyond statecraft.

Cultural cooperation during the Cold War also had diplomatic significance. It allowed both countries to maintain warmth even when political relations were cautious. Cultural events, academic contacts and literary memory made it easier for diplomats to speak in the language of friendship. In official speeches, references to ancient civilization, Persian influence and shared heritage helped soften the harshness of geopolitical divergence. Thus, culture became an instrument of *soft diplomacy*.

However, cultural cooperation had limitations. It did not automatically produce strategic partnership. Cultural affinity could not overcome Iran's alliance with the West, its closeness to Pakistan or India's non-aligned posture. Yet it played an indispensable role in preventing alienation. Culture provided continuity where politics produced caution. It ensured that India and Iran continued to view each other with respect rather than suspicion alone.

Therefore, cultural cooperation during the 1947–1979 period was subtle but significant. It preserved the historical soul of the relationship. Without this cultural foundation, India–Iran relations might have become a purely political relationship vulnerable to Cold War pressures. With it, the relationship retained dignity, familiarity and resilience.

3.4.3 Early Trade Relations

Early trade relations between India and Iran during the Cold War period were modest but meaningful. They did not reach the scale of a major strategic economic partnership, yet they maintained material contact between the two countries. Trade gave practical substance to a relationship otherwise dominated by political caution and cultural memory. It demonstrated that even under conditions of divergent alignment, India and Iran could sustain functional economic engagement.

Historically, trade between India and Iran had existed for centuries through land and sea routes. Indian textiles, spices, tea, precious stones and manufactured goods had travelled to Iranian and Persian Gulf markets, while

Iranian horses, dry fruits, carpets, metals and luxury products had reached India. After 1947, this older commercial tradition entered a modern state-regulated framework. The nature of trade changed, but the memory of commercial familiarity remained.

In the early decades after independence, India's export structure included agricultural products, textiles, tea, light manufactured goods and later engineering items. Iran's exports were increasingly shaped by oil and petroleum-related products, along with dry fruits and traditional commodities. However, India–Iran trade remained constrained by distance, shipping arrangements, financial mechanisms, political caution and the fact that both economies were undergoing internal transformation. India was pursuing planned development; Iran was moving toward oil-financed modernization.

Oil was the most important potential area of economic cooperation. Iran's petroleum resources made it a natural partner for an energy-importing India. Yet during the early Cold War, India's energy needs were smaller than in later decades, and the global oil economy was dominated by Western companies and strategic arrangements. Therefore, energy trade existed as an important possibility but did not fully transform the relationship. The great expansion of energy diplomacy would come later, especially after India's economic growth accelerated and Gulf oil became central to its energy security.

The 1973 oil crisis and subsequent rise in oil prices increased Iran's financial power and strategic importance. Iran became one of the wealthiest and most ambitious states in West Asia. India, affected by global energy price shocks, became more attentive to oil-producing countries. This created a new economic basis for improving relations with Iran. Indira Gandhi's 1974 visit to Iran should be seen partly in this context of changing energy geopolitics. India recognized that Iran's oil wealth and regional influence could not be ignored.

Trade relations were also influenced by Iran's modernization programme. The Shah's government invested in infrastructure, industry, military modernization and urban development. This created potential opportunities for Indian goods, professionals and expertise. However, Western companies dominated many high-technology and infrastructure sectors in Iran. India's capacity to compete at that level was still limited. Thus, economic engagement remained present but not transformative.

The Pakistan factor and Cold War alignments also indirectly limited trade. Since India lacked direct land access through Pakistan, overland commercial relations with Iran were constrained. Maritime trade continued, but without the strategic infrastructure that later projects such as Chabahar would provide. The absence of direct transit reduced the natural expansion of bilateral commerce. Geography and politics together narrowed economic possibilities.

Despite these limitations, early trade relations played a stabilizing role. Commercial exchange created habits of contact, administrative familiarity and mutual dependence, however limited. Trade helped prevent the relationship from becoming merely ceremonial. It gave embassies, traders and officials practical issues to manage. In diplomacy, such practical engagement often creates continuity during politically difficult periods.

Early trade also kept alive the memory of India and Iran as old commercial partners. Merchants had connected the two regions long before modern states existed. The continuation of trade after 1947, even at a modest level, represented the modern survival of an ancient pattern. This historical continuity is important because it shows that India–Iran economic relations are not artificial; they are rooted in long-standing commercial geography.

In conclusion, early trade relations from 1947 to 1979 were limited but valuable. They did not create deep economic interdependence, but they preserved economic contact. They reflected historical commercial familiarity while remaining constrained by Cold War politics, Pakistan's geography, modest infrastructure and different economic orientations. Their greatest significance lies in the fact that they kept open the possibility of future expansion. Later cooperation in energy, Chabahar, connectivity and regional trade would build upon this modest foundation.

Concluding Observation

The Cold War period placed India–Iran relations under considerable strain, but it did not destroy them. Different strategic alignments, the Pakistan factor, limited economic cooperation and weak strategic convergence prevented the relationship from reaching its full potential. Yet formal diplomacy, cultural cooperation and early trade relations ensured continuity. The two countries practiced a careful form of *civilized engagement despite disagreement*. This is the essential historical lesson of the period: India and Iran did not become strategic partners between 1947 and 1979, but they preserved enough

goodwill, memory and institutional contact to make future partnership possible.

The years before the 1979 Iranian Revolution were therefore a period of *constrained cordiality*. India's non-alignment and Iran's pro-Western monarchy stood apart, but civilizational history kept the relationship from becoming barren. Diplomacy survived where strategy hesitated; culture endured where politics diverged; trade continued where alignment limited ambition. This complex legacy shaped the next phase of India–Iran relations after the Islamic Revolution, when the two countries had to rediscover each other under a transformed ideological and regional environment.

Chapter 4:

The Iranian Revolution and Its Impact on India–Iran Relations

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was one of the most consequential upheavals of the twentieth century. It did not merely replace one ruler with another; it transformed the ideological grammar, institutional architecture, regional orientation and international personality of Iran. The fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the rise of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini marked a dramatic transition from a *pro-Western monarchy* to a *revolutionary Islamic state*. This transformation altered the politics of West Asia, disturbed the Cold War balance, challenged American influence in the Persian Gulf, energized political Islam, and compelled countries such as India to reassess their diplomatic approach toward Tehran.

For India, the Iranian Revolution was both a challenge and an opportunity. It was a challenge because India had maintained formal relations with the Shah's Iran, and the sudden collapse of the monarchy introduced uncertainty into bilateral relations. It was also a challenge because the new Islamic Republic spoke a language of revolutionary ideology, anti-Western resistance and Islamic political legitimacy, while India remained a secular, democratic and non-aligned republic. Yet it was also an opportunity because the revolution removed Iran from the rigid Western alliance system that had earlier limited India–Iran strategic convergence. The same Iran that had once been closely tied to the United States, CENTO and Pakistan now began searching for new Asian, non-Western and sovereign relationships. India, with its doctrine of *strategic autonomy*, civilizational ties with Iran and experience of non-aligned diplomacy, was well positioned to maintain engagement.

The impact of the Iranian Revolution on India–Iran relations must therefore be understood with subtlety. It did not produce immediate strategic partnership, nor did it create permanent estrangement. Instead, it initiated a new diplomatic phase marked by *cautious adaptation*, *ideological observation*, *energy calculation*, *regional reassessment* and *civilizational*

continuity. India neither rejected the new regime nor embraced revolutionary ideology. It followed the classical Indian method of *prudent recognition of political realities*: respect sovereignty, avoid interference, preserve communication, and judge relations through national interest. This chapter begins by examining the revolution itself—its causes, the fall of the Shah, and the rise of the Islamic Republic—before analysing its consequences for India–Iran relations.

4.1 The Iranian Revolution of 1979

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a complex, multi-class, multi-ideological and deeply emotional movement against the Pahlavi monarchy. It brought together religious scholars, bazaar merchants, students, workers, secular intellectuals, nationalists, leftists, traditional classes, urban migrants and segments of the middle class. Such a broad coalition indicates that the revolution cannot be reduced to one cause or one ideology. It was the cumulative eruption of *authoritarian repression, cultural alienation, economic disequilibrium, foreign dependence, religious mobilization, political exclusion* and *symbolic resentment*. It was a revolution against a regime that appeared externally strong but internally brittle.

The Shah's Iran had been presented for decades as a modernizing, stable and pro-Western state. Its oil revenues financed infrastructure, military expansion, education, urban growth and technological modernization. Yet beneath this surface of development lay deep contradictions. The state modernized rapidly but denied meaningful political participation. It expanded education but suppressed dissent. It promoted Westernization but offended religious and cultural sensibilities. It accumulated oil wealth but failed to distribute benefits equitably. It celebrated ancient Persian grandeur but seemed dependent upon American protection. These contradictions produced a crisis of legitimacy.

The revolution also had a strong symbolic and religious dimension. Shi'i Islam, with its emphasis on martyrdom, justice, moral resistance and opposition to tyranny, provided a powerful language for mass mobilization. Ayatollah Khomeini, exiled since the 1960s, became the symbolic centre of opposition. His speeches, writings and cassette recordings circulated widely and transformed him into the voice of defiance against the Shah. For many Iranians, Khomeini represented not merely a cleric but a moral counter-

sovereign, a figure who embodied resistance against monarchy, corruption, foreign domination and cultural humiliation.

The revolutionary movement escalated in 1978 through demonstrations, strikes, mourning ceremonies, clerical mobilization, bazaar closures and mass protests. The cycle of protest and repression intensified rather than weakened opposition. In Shi'i political culture, the death of protesters often produced further mourning gatherings, which in turn became new protests. Thus, repression generated *ritualized resistance*. The state's attempt to restore order deepened its legitimacy crisis. By late 1978, the Shah's regime had lost the aura of invincibility.

The revolution culminated in January and February 1979. The Shah left Iran on 16 January 1979, officially describing his departure as temporary, but politically it marked the collapse of monarchical authority. Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran on 1 February 1979 after years of exile. On 11 February 1979, the monarchy effectively collapsed, and revolutionary forces gained control. A referendum later confirmed the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Thus, Iran moved from monarchy to republic, but not to a secular liberal republic. It moved toward an Islamic political order in which clerical authority, revolutionary legitimacy and republican institutions were combined in a distinctive and unprecedented form.

For India, the revolution required careful diplomatic interpretation. India had to understand whether the new Iran would become hostile, isolationist, pan-Islamic, anti-India, anti-Western, pro-Soviet, or independently revolutionary. New Delhi's response was cautious. India recognized the new reality and maintained diplomatic relations. This reflected India's long-standing principle of *non-interference in internal affairs* and its recognition that Iran's geography, oil resources, Persian Gulf location and civilizational ties made it indispensable regardless of regime type.

4.1.1 Causes of the Revolution

The causes of the Iranian Revolution were numerous and mutually reinforcing. No single explanation is sufficient. The revolution was not simply a clerical uprising, nor merely an economic protest, nor only a nationalist reaction to foreign influence. It was a convergence of many discontents that gradually fused into a national movement. Scholars such as Homa Katouzian in *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, Ervand

Abrahamian in *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Nikki Keddie in *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, and Said Amir Arjomand in *The Turban for the Crown* have emphasized that the revolution arose from a deep crisis of state, society, economy, culture and legitimacy. In diplomatic language, it was the collapse of the Shah's *authoritarian modernization project*.

The first major cause was the Shah's autocratic political system. After the 1953 coup and the consolidation of monarchical authority, political pluralism was severely restricted. Opposition parties were marginalized, censored or outlawed. The security apparatus, especially SAVAK, became a symbol of surveillance, intimidation and repression. Political participation was narrow, controlled and often ceremonial. The monarchy modernized institutions but did not democratize power. This contradiction produced a widening gulf between state and society. A politically awakened society was governed by an increasingly centralized state. Such imbalance generated resentment among students, intellectuals, professionals, religious leaders and political activists.

The second cause was the memory of foreign interference. The 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, after his nationalization of Iran's oil industry, deeply affected Iranian political consciousness. For many Iranians, the restoration of the Shah's authority was associated with British and American intervention. This memory damaged the monarchy's nationalist legitimacy. The Shah projected himself as a modernizer and guardian of Iranian greatness, but many citizens perceived him as dependent upon Western powers. The contradiction between *imperial grandeur* and *foreign dependence* became politically explosive.

The third cause was economic imbalance. The oil boom of the 1970s gave Iran enormous revenues, but rapid state spending created inflation, inequality, corruption, urban congestion and social dislocation. Grand development schemes created visible modernization, but they also produced uneven growth. Rural populations migrated to cities, but urban employment and housing could not absorb them adequately. Consumer expectations rose faster than institutional capacity. Economic growth without social equilibrium became destabilizing. The Shah's modernization generated prosperity for some, anxiety for many and resentment among those excluded from benefits.

The fourth cause was cultural alienation. The Shah's modernization project was associated with rapid Westernization, secularization and elite imitation

of Western lifestyles. Many religious and traditional groups believed that Iranian Islamic identity was being weakened. The monarchy's celebration of pre-Islamic Persian imperial grandeur, especially the lavish 1971 celebrations at Persepolis, was criticized by opponents as extravagant and disconnected from the lives of ordinary people. The state attempted to manufacture national pride, but it often produced cultural resentment. Modernization appeared to many not as organic development but as *cultural dislocation*.

The fifth cause was religious opposition. The Shi'i clergy had long possessed social influence through mosques, seminaries, religious endowments, rituals and networks of moral authority. The Shah's land reforms, secular legal measures and cultural policies weakened traditional religious interests and offended clerical sensibilities. Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as the most forceful religious critic of the Shah, especially after his opposition to the White Revolution and foreign influence. His exile did not silence him; it transformed him into a symbol. Through sermons, printed texts and cassette recordings, his message circulated widely. Religion became a language through which social injustice, political tyranny and foreign dependence could be condemned.

The sixth cause was the alienation of the bazaar. The bazaar was not only an economic institution; it was a social and religious network connected to clerical authority, charitable institutions and urban traditional life. The Shah's modernization policies and economic centralization threatened bazaar interests. Many bazaar merchants supported religious opposition, funded protests and participated in strikes. This alliance between the *mosque* and the *bazaar* became one of the strongest organizational foundations of the revolution.

The seventh cause was the failure of the Shah's political liberalization. In the mid and late 1970s, under domestic and international pressure, including the human rights emphasis of the Carter administration, the Shah attempted limited political relaxation. However, this partial opening came too late and appeared inconsistent. The regime alternated between concession and repression. This vacillation encouraged opposition rather than controlling it. Once fear began to diminish, previously silent groups entered the streets. The monarchy lost psychological authority before it lost institutional control.

The eighth cause was the symbolic power of martyrdom in Shi'i political culture. When protesters were killed, mourning ceremonies after forty days

became occasions for further demonstrations. This created a recurring cycle of grief, mobilization and confrontation. The state's violence, intended to restore order, instead produced new moral energy for opposition. In such a context, political protest became sacred resistance. The revolution acquired a rhythm shaped by religious memory and collective mourning.

The ninth cause was the fragmentation of elite support. By 1978, many groups that had previously tolerated the Shah began doubting the regime's future. Some technocrats, professionals, intellectuals and even segments of the middle class lost confidence. The army remained important, but the regime's political legitimacy was collapsing. A monarchy can survive many crises if its ruling coalition remains united; the Shah's ruling structure became increasingly uncertain. The state appeared powerful, but its moral authority was exhausted.

The tenth cause was the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Revolutions require not only grievances but also symbols capable of unifying diverse opposition. Khomeini provided such symbolic leadership. Liberals, leftists, nationalists, bazaaris, clerics and ordinary believers did not all share the same future vision, but many could unite under the demand that the Shah must go. Khomeini's language was broad enough to mobilize multiple groups but clear enough to focus anger against the monarchy. This gave the movement extraordinary momentum.

Thus, the causes of the Iranian Revolution lay in the accumulated contradictions of the Pahlavi state. The Shah's regime attempted modernization without political inclusion, nationalism without full sovereignty, secularization without cultural consent, development without equality, and Western alliance without domestic legitimacy. The result was revolutionary rupture. The revolution was the moment when these contradictions became historically uncontainable.

4.1.2 Fall of the Shah

The fall of the Shah was not a sudden accident; it was the final consequence of a long erosion of legitimacy. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi had ruled Iran since 1941, but his authority became especially strong after 1953. For many years, he appeared to be one of the most powerful rulers in West Asia. He commanded a large army, possessed immense oil wealth, enjoyed American support, controlled a centralized bureaucracy, and directed an ambitious

modernization programme. Yet the events of 1978–1979 revealed that the external appearance of strength concealed profound internal fragility.

The Shah's fall was accelerated by the contradiction between state coercion and societal mobilization. The regime possessed instruments of repression, but these instruments became increasingly counterproductive. Every act of violence deepened public anger. Every attempt at censorship strengthened underground communication. Every concession appeared weak, and every crackdown appeared illegitimate. The Shah could neither reform convincingly nor repress decisively. His political style became trapped between authoritarian habit and late-stage uncertainty.

The protests that began in 1978 expanded from religious centres to major cities, universities, bazaars and industrial sectors. Strikes became especially damaging. Oil workers, civil servants and urban labour groups gradually joined the movement, weakening the economic machinery of the state. The bazaar closures signalled the withdrawal of traditional commercial support. University protests indicated intellectual alienation. Clerical mobilization gave the movement moral direction. The convergence of these forces made the monarchy increasingly untenable.

The Shah's illness also affected his political conduct. He was suffering from cancer, though this was not publicly known in full detail at the time. His physical weakness and psychological uncertainty contributed to indecision. Historical accounts often describe him as wavering between conciliation and force. In revolutionary situations, hesitation can be fatal. The state loses authority when it appears afraid of its own power. The Shah's inability to produce either credible reform or decisive control accelerated the collapse.

The appointment of successive governments failed to stabilize the situation. Attempts to introduce moderate reforms and replace unpopular officials did not satisfy opposition groups because by late 1978 the central demand had become the Shah's departure. The appointment of Shahpur Bakhtiar as prime minister was also insufficient. Bakhtiar, though connected to nationalist circles, was viewed by many revolutionaries as compromised because he accepted office under the monarchy. The revolutionary movement had passed beyond the stage at which administrative change could save the regime.

The Shah left Iran on 16 January 1979. Officially, his departure was described as temporary, but politically it was understood as the end of Pahlavi authority.

Crowds celebrated in the streets because his departure symbolized the collapse of monarchical power. The image of the Shah leaving Iran became one of the defining scenes of twentieth-century revolutionary history. A ruler who had presented himself as the architect of a great civilization departed a country that no longer accepted his rule. The event represented the defeat of *authoritarian modernism by revolutionary mobilization*.

The army's role was crucial. The Shah's regime depended heavily on the military, but by February 1979 the army's willingness to defend the monarchy had weakened. Revolutionary pressure, internal uncertainty, mass protests and the lack of clear political direction reduced the army's cohesion. When the military declared neutrality, the monarchy effectively lost its final institutional pillar. The revolution then moved rapidly toward victory.

The fall of the Shah had immediate regional and international consequences. The United States lost one of its strongest allies in the Persian Gulf. Western strategy in West Asia was shaken. Conservative monarchies in the Gulf became anxious about revolutionary contagion. The Soviet Union observed the transformation cautiously, hoping perhaps for reduced American influence but wary of Islamic mobilization. Pakistan had to adjust to the disappearance of a friendly monarchy. India, too, had to reassess its Iran policy.

For India, the fall of the Shah removed a ruler whose pro-Western and Pakistan-friendly orientation had limited bilateral convergence. Yet India did not view the fall with ideological triumphalism. New Delhi remained careful. The revolution introduced uncertainty regarding Iran's future foreign policy, domestic stability, oil supplies and regional behaviour. India's response reflected diplomatic maturity: observe carefully, avoid interference, preserve relations and engage the new authority.

The fall of the Shah therefore marked the end of one diplomatic chapter and the beginning of another. During the Shah's rule, India–Iran relations had been cordial but limited by Cold War alignments. After his fall, old limitations changed, but new complexities emerged. The monarchy's departure opened the possibility of relations less constrained by Western alliance structures, but the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology created new uncertainties. The fall of the Shah was thus both an ending and a strategic opening.

4.1.3 Rise of the Islamic Republic

The rise of the Islamic Republic transformed Iran's political identity. It created a new state that combined republican institutions with clerical authority, popular mobilization with religious legitimacy, electoral mechanisms with the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, and anti-imperialist rhetoric with Islamic constitutionalism. This political formation was historically unprecedented. It was not a restoration of traditional monarchy, nor a secular republic, nor a Marxist revolutionary state. It was a revolutionary Islamic republic claiming to represent both the sovereignty of the people and the guardianship of divine law.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was central to this transformation. His return to Iran on 1 February 1979 gave the revolution a visible and charismatic centre. He enjoyed immense symbolic authority because he had opposed the Shah from exile and had come to embody resistance. Many groups participated in the revolution, but Khomeini's leadership soon became dominant. His vision of Islamic government, articulated in his lectures and writings, provided the ideological basis for the new order. In his conception, political authority had to be guided by Islamic jurisprudence and moral guardianship.

The referendum of March 1979 and the declaration of the Islamic Republic on 1 April 1979 gave institutional form to the revolutionary transformation. The monarchy was abolished, and Iran was officially reconstituted as an Islamic Republic. Later constitutional developments established institutions such as the Supreme Leader, Guardian Council, Islamic Consultative Assembly, presidency and revolutionary bodies. These institutions reflected an attempt to merge modern state structures with clerical oversight. The result was a hybrid system: republican in form, revolutionary in origin, and theocratic in ultimate guardianship.

The rise of the Islamic Republic also involved the consolidation of power by religious forces. During the revolution, liberals, nationalists, leftists, students, bazaaris and religious groups had cooperated against the Shah. After victory, however, these groups differed sharply over the future of Iran. The clerical leadership gradually sidelined secular and leftist rivals. Revolutionary committees, courts and new institutions helped reshape the state. The revolution, therefore, moved from broad anti-monarchical unity to ideological consolidation under Islamic leadership.

The new republic defined itself through *anti-imperialism, Islamic authenticity, social justice, resistance to Western domination and support for oppressed peoples*. The United States, once the Shah's principal patron, became the primary symbol of imperial interference. The seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 deepened the rupture between Iran and the United States and confirmed the revolutionary regime's anti-American orientation. This crisis transformed Iran's global position and forced other countries to reconsider their diplomatic relations with Tehran.

The Islamic Republic also transformed Iran's regional posture. Under the Shah, Iran had been a conservative pro-Western monarchy seeking regional dominance through military power and oil wealth. Under the Islamic Republic, Iran sought to project revolutionary legitimacy and Islamic solidarity, especially among Shia communities and anti-Western movements. This alarmed several Arab monarchies and contributed to regional tensions. The Iran–Iraq War, beginning in 1980, would further militarize the new republic and shape its security culture for decades.

For India, the rise of the Islamic Republic required a careful recalibration. India was a secular state with a large Muslim population and strong ties with Arab countries, the Soviet Union and later multiple global actors. It could not endorse revolutionary Islam as a model, but it also could not alienate Iran. India's policy was guided by respect for sovereignty and recognition of Iran's importance. New Delhi understood that regimes may change, but geography remains. Iran continued to occupy a vital location near the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Arabian Sea. It continued to possess energy resources and civilizational ties with India.

India also saw that the Islamic Republic's anti-Western orientation might reduce the earlier Cold War distance between New Delhi and Tehran. The Shah's Iran had been closely connected to the United States and Pakistan. Revolutionary Iran was no longer a Western ally. This created possibilities for dialogue, though not without complications. The new Iran's Islamic rhetoric, its criticism of Western influence and its regional revolutionary ambition had to be handled with diplomatic caution. India's challenge was to engage Iran without importing Iran's ideological conflicts into India's foreign policy.

The rise of the Islamic Republic therefore altered the basis of India–Iran relations. Before 1979, the relationship was limited by Iran's Western

alignment and Pakistan connection. After 1979, those limitations weakened, but new issues emerged: revolutionary ideology, Iran–U.S. hostility, Iran–Iraq War, Gulf instability, energy disruptions and regional polarization. India’s task was to preserve its own *strategic autonomy* while maintaining constructive engagement with the new Iran.

In civilizational terms, the Islamic Republic did not erase Iran’s Persian identity; it reinterpreted it within an Islamic revolutionary framework. Iran remained heir to Persian civilization, but the new state emphasized Islamic legitimacy and anti-imperialist resistance. India, with its long Indo-Persian heritage and plural civilizational outlook, could continue to relate to Iran culturally even while navigating ideological differences. This cultural continuity helped soften the shock of political transformation.

In conclusion, the rise of the Islamic Republic was a turning point not only in Iranian history but also in India–Iran relations. It ended the Shah-era pattern of constrained cordiality and inaugurated a new phase of cautious engagement with a revolutionary state. The revolution altered Iran’s alliances, regional behaviour, ideological vocabulary and domestic institutions. For India, it required diplomatic adaptation rather than rupture. India’s response reflected the enduring wisdom of foreign policy: states must engage not the regimes they prefer, but the realities that history produces.

4.2 Change in Iran’s Foreign Policy

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 brought a profound and almost seismic transformation in Iran’s foreign policy. Under the Shah, Iran had been a *pro-Western monarchy*, a strategic pillar of American policy in the Persian Gulf, a participant in Western-sponsored security arrangements, and an ambitious regional power whose international conduct was shaped by anti-communism, oil wealth, monarchical modernization and military expansion. After the Revolution, Iran’s external personality changed dramatically. The new Islamic Republic rejected the Shah’s dependence upon the United States, criticized Western domination, placed *Islamic legitimacy* at the centre of its political vocabulary, and declared its commitment to independence, justice and resistance against hegemonic influence. Thus, Iran’s foreign policy moved from *monarchical alignment* to *revolutionary autonomy*.

This transformation did not mean that Iran abandoned national interest. Rather, it redefined national interest through a new ideological and

constitutional framework. The Islamic Republic sought to combine *sovereignty, religious identity, anti-imperialism, regional activism* and *strategic survival*. Its diplomacy became a mixture of ideology and pragmatism. On the one hand, Iran spoke in the language of revolution, Islamic solidarity and resistance to domination; on the other hand, it had to protect its borders, sell oil, manage war, preserve state institutions, and maintain relations with non-hostile countries. This duality—*ideological assertion* and *pragmatic statecraft*—became a permanent feature of Iran's post-1979 foreign policy.

For India, the change in Iran's foreign policy had immediate implications. The earlier obstacle of Iran's close alliance with the United States and Western bloc was weakened, but new uncertainties emerged from Iran's revolutionary rhetoric, its conflict with the West, its strained relations with several Arab states, and its soon-to-begin war with Iraq. India had to evaluate revolutionary Iran not through emotional reaction but through *strategic sobriety*. New Delhi recognized that Iran's regime had changed, but Iran's geography had not changed. It remained central to the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy security and India's extended neighbourhood. Therefore, India's approach was guided by continuity, caution and calibrated engagement.

4.2.1 Anti-Western Orientation

The anti-Western orientation of revolutionary Iran was one of the most defining features of its post-1979 foreign policy. This orientation emerged from the historical memory of foreign intervention, the 1953 overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh, the Shah's close association with Washington, Western support for monarchical authoritarianism, and the revolutionary perception that Iran had been reduced to a subordinate client state under the Pahlavi regime. The Islamic Republic interpreted the Revolution as an act of *national emancipation* from Western domination. Therefore, anti-Westernism was not merely a diplomatic posture; it became part of the state's foundational political mythology.

The United States became the principal symbol of external domination in the revolutionary imagination. Under the Shah, Iran had received American military assistance, intelligence cooperation, technological support and diplomatic protection. After the Revolution, these same connections were recast as evidence of dependency and humiliation. The seizure of the

American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and the subsequent hostage crisis turned ideological hostility into open confrontation. Iran–United States relations entered a prolonged phase of hostility that would shape West Asian politics for decades. The Islamic Republic defined itself partly through resistance to American power, and this resistance became an organizing principle of its regional and global diplomacy.

Iran's anti-Western orientation also included suspicion of Western cultural influence. The revolutionary leadership criticized what it viewed as *Westoxication*, cultural imitation, moral decadence and alienation from Islamic authenticity. In this sense, foreign policy and domestic cultural policy were closely connected. The Revolution was presented not only as a political change but as a civilizational recovery. Iran sought to restore dignity by rejecting the symbolic and material dependence associated with the Shah's modernization project. Thus, anti-Western orientation was simultaneously geopolitical, cultural and moral.

This orientation affected Iran's relations with Europe as well, though with variations. While the United States became the chief adversary, European states were also viewed through the memory of colonial and neo-colonial involvement, especially Britain's historical role in Iranian oil politics. Yet Iran's need for trade, technology and diplomatic channels prevented a complete severance from Europe. This demonstrated the recurring duality of Iranian foreign policy: revolutionary language coexisted with practical necessity.

For India, Iran's anti-Western orientation produced both opportunities and complications. The opportunity lay in the fact that Iran was no longer locked into the Western security structure that had earlier limited India–Iran convergence. India's own tradition of non-alignment and opposition to external domination gave it some conceptual affinity with Iran's desire for independence. However, India could not share Iran's intense anti-American revolutionary posture. India maintained relations with the Soviet Union, the United States, Europe, Arab states and others according to its own national interest. Therefore, New Delhi had to engage Iran without being absorbed into Iran's ideological confrontation with the West.

India's diplomatic wisdom lay in distinguishing between Iran's anti-Western rhetoric and India's own strategic autonomy. India did not endorse revolutionary hostility as a foreign-policy model, but it understood the

historical reasons for Iran's resentment. It avoided public moralizing and focused on preserving bilateral communication. This was especially important because India had economic interests in the Persian Gulf, a large diaspora in West Asia, and an expanding need for energy security. A confrontational or ideological response to Iran would have served no Indian interest.

Iran's anti-Western orientation also pushed Tehran to search for alternative partners in Asia, the developing world and non-Western forums. This created space for India, though the possibilities remained limited during the 1980s because of the Iran–Iraq War and regional turbulence. Iran's isolation from the West encouraged it to maintain relations with countries that did not participate in hostility against it. India's non-aligned identity helped it retain acceptability in Tehran. Thus, revolutionary anti-Westernism indirectly opened a new diplomatic window for India–Iran relations, even while creating wider instability.

In theoretical terms, Iran's anti-Western orientation may be described as a policy of *revolutionary sovereignty*. It was revolutionary because it rejected the inherited alignment of the Shah; it was sovereign because it emphasized independence from external domination. Yet sovereignty pursued through ideological confrontation also generated costs: sanctions, diplomatic isolation, military pressure, economic difficulty and regional suspicion. India's response to this orientation was neither approval nor rejection, but *measured engagement*.

4.2.2 Islamic Identity in Foreign Policy

The Islamic Republic placed *Islamic identity* at the heart of its foreign policy. This was a major departure from the Shah's Iran, which had emphasized Persian nationalism, monarchical grandeur, modernization and Western alignment. Revolutionary Iran reinterpreted the state through Islamic legitimacy, Shi'i political symbolism, clerical authority and the language of justice for the oppressed. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic gave formal expression to this orientation by referring to independence, rejection of domination, support for Muslims and concern for oppressed peoples. Thus, Islamic identity became both a source of domestic legitimacy and a principle of external conduct.

Islamic identity in Iran's foreign policy had several dimensions. First, it provided moral justification for rejecting Western domination. The Revolution was presented as a struggle against tyranny and arrogance. Second, it gave Iran a claim to leadership among Muslim peoples, especially those who felt marginalized by Western-backed regimes. Third, it strengthened Iran's connection with Shi'i communities and movements across the region. Fourth, it allowed Tehran to portray its diplomacy as part of a larger moral struggle rather than ordinary power politics. This gave Iranian foreign policy a *transnational ideological vocabulary*.

However, Islamic identity did not abolish Iran's Persian national consciousness. The Islamic Republic inherited a state with ancient civilizational pride, a strong sense of territorial sovereignty and deep Persian historical memory. Therefore, Iranian foreign policy after 1979 combined *Islamic universalism* with *Iranian nationalism*. This combination could be creative but also contradictory. Iran spoke of Islamic solidarity, yet it also defended Iranian national interests. It criticized nationalism in some contexts, yet it fiercely protected Iran's territorial integrity during the Iran–Iraq War. This tension between ideology and nation-state realism became one of the defining features of post-revolution foreign policy.

Islamic identity also affected Iran's regional relations. Many Arab monarchies feared that Iran would export revolutionary ideas to their Shia populations and challenge monarchical legitimacy. Iraq under Saddam Hussein saw revolutionary Iran as an ideological and strategic threat. Saudi Arabia viewed Iran's revolutionary Islamic discourse as a challenge to its own religious prestige. Thus, Iran's Islamic identity did not automatically unify the Muslim world; instead, it often intensified sectarian, ideological and geopolitical rivalries. The Revolution created inspiration for some groups and anxiety for many states.

For India, Iran's Islamic identity required careful diplomatic handling. India is a secular, democratic republic with one of the world's largest Muslim populations, including a significant Shia community, but its foreign policy is not based on religious identity. India could not accept any external religious-political claim affecting its domestic pluralism or sovereignty. At the same time, India understood that Iran's Islamic identity was part of Iran's constitutional order and revolutionary self-definition. Therefore, India engaged Iran as a sovereign state while avoiding ideological entanglement.

India's civilizational relationship with Iran helped manage this complexity. India's links with Iran were not restricted to Islam alone; they included ancient Indo-Iranian affinities, Zoroastrian migration, Persian language, Sufism, literature, trade and shared cultural memory. This broader civilizational base allowed India to relate to Iran beyond religious politics. It prevented India–Iran relations from being reduced to Islamic identity alone. India could appreciate Iran's Islamic self-expression while situating the relationship within a larger Indo-Persian and Asian historical framework.

Iran's Islamic identity also influenced its positions in international forums, especially on questions involving Palestine, Muslim communities and anti-Western causes. India, too, had historically supported Palestinian rights and anti-colonial struggles, but India's reasoning was secular, legal and anti-colonial rather than theocratic. This created occasional convergence in outcome but difference in ideological basis. India's diplomacy therefore required nuance: cooperate where interests converged, remain independent where ideological premises differed.

In the broader analysis, Islamic identity gave Iran's foreign policy energy, symbolism and mobilizing power, but it also complicated Iran's relations with neighbouring states and non-Muslim partners. For India, the appropriate response was *constitutional realism*: respect Iran's internal identity, preserve India's secular autonomy, and pursue bilateral interests through sovereign diplomacy. This approach allowed India to maintain relations with revolutionary Iran without allowing ideological difference to become diplomatic rupture.

4.2.3 Iran's New Regional Role

After the Revolution, Iran's regional role changed fundamentally. Under the Shah, Iran had been a conservative, pro-Western, militarily powerful monarchy seeking dominance in the Persian Gulf. Under the Islamic Republic, Iran became a revolutionary state challenging Western influence, opposing Israel, criticizing conservative Arab monarchies, supporting Islamic and anti-imperialist movements, and projecting itself as the defender of oppressed peoples. This transformation altered the regional balance of West Asia and generated widespread anxiety among neighbouring regimes.

Iran's new regional role was shaped by revolutionary ambition and security insecurity. The Islamic Republic sought to export moral and political

influence, but it also faced encirclement, hostility and war. The new regime was internally consolidating power when Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980. The Iran–Iraq War became the crucible in which revolutionary Iran’s security culture was forged. The war strengthened Iran’s emphasis on self-reliance, sacrifice, martyrdom, strategic depth and suspicion of hostile coalitions. It also deepened the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran’s political and military system.

Iran’s conflict with Iraq transformed its regional priorities. Before the war, revolutionary rhetoric emphasized Islamic awakening and opposition to imperialism. During the war, survival of the state became the overriding concern. Iran had to defend its territory, mobilize society, maintain oil exports, seek weapons and diplomatic support, and withstand regional isolation. Many Arab states supported Iraq financially or diplomatically, fearing Iran’s revolutionary appeal. This experience convinced Iran that it could not depend on conventional alliances and had to develop asymmetric methods, ideological networks and strategic depth.

The Revolution also changed Iran’s relationship with the Persian Gulf. The Gulf was no longer simply a zone of oil exports and Western security arrangements; it became a theatre of revolutionary contestation, maritime vulnerability and ideological rivalry. Iran’s position near the Strait of Hormuz gave it strategic leverage, but it also exposed it to naval pressure and regional suspicion. During the later phase of the Iran–Iraq War, the Tanker War internationalized the conflict by threatening shipping and oil flows. The Gulf became one of the most militarized maritime spaces of the 1980s.

Iran’s new regional role also included support for movements that opposed Israel and Western influence. This policy gradually increased Iran’s involvement in Lebanon and other regional theatres. The Islamic Republic presented such support as defence of the oppressed and resistance against occupation. Critics, however, viewed it as interventionist and destabilizing. This dual interpretation remains central to debates about Iran’s regional role. For its supporters, Iran became a power of resistance; for its rivals, it became a revolutionary disruptor.

For India, Iran’s new regional role required diplomatic vigilance. India had no interest in taking sides in sectarian or ideological conflicts. It needed stable relations with Iran, Iraq, Arab Gulf states, Palestine, later Israel, and other actors. India’s West Asia policy was based on *multi-directional engagement*.

Therefore, India could not allow Iran's regional conflicts to dictate India's choices. New Delhi's approach was to maintain contact with Tehran while preserving relations with Iraq and Arab states.

Iran's new regional role also affected India's energy security. The Persian Gulf was central to global oil supplies, and any instability there could affect Indian imports, prices and shipping. The Iran–Iraq War and Tanker War demonstrated the vulnerability of energy routes. India's concern was not ideological victory for one side; it was regional stability, safe passage, energy affordability and protection of Indian nationals. Thus, India viewed Iran's regional role through the lens of practical security.

At the same time, India recognized that revolutionary Iran was now more independent of the Western bloc than Shah-era Iran had been. This independence created potential for future cooperation, especially as India too valued strategic autonomy. But in the 1980s, the Iran–Iraq War, U.S.–Iran hostility and Gulf militarization prevented any rapid expansion of India–Iran relations. Iran's new regional role was significant, but unstable.

In conclusion, Iran's post-revolution regional role shifted from *pro-Western pillar* to *revolutionary pole*. This shift transformed the diplomatic map of West Asia. India responded not with ideological enthusiasm or hostility, but with caution. It understood that Iran had become both more autonomous and more controversial. The challenge for India was to engage Iran as a necessary regional actor while avoiding entanglement in Iran's conflicts.

4.3 India's Response to Revolutionary Iran

India's response to revolutionary Iran was marked by *diplomatic continuity*, *strategic caution* and *practical realism*. The Iranian Revolution created uncertainty, but India did not allow uncertainty to become rupture. New Delhi recognized that Iran's domestic political order had changed, yet the fundamentals of geography, energy, regional importance and civilizational connection remained intact. India's response was therefore neither ideological endorsement nor diplomatic rejection. It was a carefully calibrated policy of engagement with the new reality.

India's foreign policy tradition helped shape this response. Since independence, India had followed the principles of sovereignty, non-interference and independent judgment. India had dealt with monarchies,

socialist states, capitalist democracies, military regimes and revolutionary governments without making internal political systems the sole criterion of diplomatic relations. In the case of Iran, this tradition proved useful. India accepted the Islamic Republic as the legitimate political authority of Iran and maintained relations on the basis of state-to-state continuity.

India also had to protect practical interests. Indian nationals, trade, oil supplies, maritime routes, regional diplomacy and relations with other West Asian states were all affected by developments in Iran. An emotional or ideological response would have endangered these interests. Therefore, India maintained calm, observed developments carefully, and avoided unnecessary public criticism. This was *quiet diplomacy* in its most classical form.

4.3.1 Diplomatic Continuity

Diplomatic continuity was the cornerstone of India's response to revolutionary Iran. India did not sever relations after the Revolution, nor did it treat the Islamic Republic as an illegitimate regime. This was consistent with India's policy of respecting sovereign choices made by other societies. India's approach was based on the recognition that revolutions may change governments, constitutions and ideological orientations, but diplomatic relations between states can and should continue when mutual interests exist.

The continuity of India–Iran relations after 1979 was especially significant because many countries found themselves disoriented by the Revolution. The United States lost a major ally and entered direct confrontation with Tehran. Arab Gulf states feared revolutionary export. Iraq moved toward war. Western companies and diplomats reassessed their presence. India, however, avoided panic. It neither joined anti-Iranian hostility nor surrendered to revolutionary rhetoric. It kept communication open.

This continuity drew upon the older foundation of the 1950 Treaty of Friendship and decades of diplomatic contact. Although India–Iran relations under the Shah had been limited, they had not been hostile. This institutional memory helped India manage the transition. Indian diplomats could work through existing channels while adjusting to new political actors in Tehran. Diplomatic continuity therefore prevented a vacuum.

India's non-aligned identity also helped preserve relations. Revolutionary Iran distrusted states seen as instruments of Western domination. India, despite its own relations with many powers, was not a Western military ally.

Its record of anti-colonialism, support for developing countries, and advocacy of sovereign equality gave it credibility in Tehran. This did not mean Iran and India agreed on everything, but it helped Iran view India as a country with independent standing.

Diplomatic continuity also required restraint in language. India did not publicly celebrate the fall of the Shah, because doing so would have been diplomatically improper and inconsistent with non-interference. Nor did it condemn the Islamic Republic merely because its ideology differed from India's secular democracy. India's public posture remained respectful and measured. Such restraint is a mark of mature diplomacy.

The importance of continuity became even greater after the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980. India had relations with both Iran and Iraq and did not want to sacrifice either. Maintaining diplomatic relations with Iran allowed India to communicate, protect interests and avoid being seen as hostile. It also preserved India's long-term options in the Persian Gulf.

Thus, India's diplomatic continuity toward revolutionary Iran represented *interest-based steadiness*. It showed that India's foreign policy was not easily disturbed by ideological upheaval. New Delhi understood that Iran remained a significant regional state, and therefore engagement was necessary. This continuity became the foundation for later improvement in India–Iran relations after the 1980s.

4.3.2 Protection of Indian Interests

The protection of Indian interests was central to India's response to revolutionary Iran. India's interests in relation to Iran were diverse: energy security, safety of Indian nationals, trade, regional stability, access to West Asia, maritime security, and preservation of diplomatic space. The Revolution introduced uncertainty into all these areas. India therefore had to ensure that political transformation in Iran did not endanger its practical requirements.

Energy was among the most important concerns. India's economy required stable supplies of oil, and the Persian Gulf was already an important energy zone. Iran's revolutionary turmoil and later the Iran–Iraq War created risks for production, pricing and shipping. India could not afford an ideological policy that endangered oil supplies. Therefore, it maintained working relations with Iran while also preserving ties with Iraq and other Gulf

suppliers. This diversified approach reflected India's broader principle of *energy prudence*.

The safety of Indian nationals was another concern. West Asia has long hosted Indian workers, traders, professionals and pilgrims. Political instability in Iran and war in the Gulf could endanger lives and livelihoods. India's embassies and diplomatic channels were essential for consular protection, evacuation planning, documentation and communication. Maintaining relations with Tehran helped India protect its citizens and avoid unnecessary vulnerability.

Trade interests also required continuity. Even if trade volumes were not transformative, India and Iran had commercial links that needed preservation. Indian exports, imports, shipping arrangements and payments could be affected by revolutionary instability and war. Diplomatic relations helped manage these practical issues. Trade is often the quietest part of diplomacy, but in times of crisis it becomes indispensable.

India also had to protect its broader West Asian diplomacy. It could not appear anti-Iranian because that would damage relations with a major regional state. It could not appear pro-Iranian in a way that alienated Iraq and Arab Gulf countries. Therefore, India's policy aimed at maintaining balance. This balancing was not indecision; it was *strategic equidistance in a conflict-prone region*.

The protection of Indian interests also involved maritime security. The Iran–Iraq War and especially the Tanker War created risks in the Persian Gulf. Ships, oil terminals and maritime routes became vulnerable. India, as an energy-importing and maritime-trading country, had a direct interest in freedom of navigation and stability in the Gulf. It had to monitor developments carefully without becoming militarily involved.

India's domestic pluralism was also an indirect interest. Revolutionary Iran's Islamic identity had potential resonance beyond its borders, including among Shia communities. India had to ensure that external ideological currents did not disturb domestic harmony. The Indian state therefore engaged Iran respectfully as a sovereign country but did not allow Iranian revolutionary discourse to shape Indian domestic politics. This was an important aspect of protecting constitutional secularism.

In the long term, India also protected its strategic options. Even during the turbulence of the 1980s, Indian policymakers understood that Iran's geography would remain crucial for future access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Although this logic became more operational after the Cold War, its foundations already existed. By maintaining relations during the Revolution and war, India ensured that future cooperation would remain possible.

Thus, protection of Indian interests required a policy of calm engagement. India avoided ideological confrontation, maintained relations with all relevant actors, diversified energy sources, preserved consular channels, and kept diplomatic options open. This reflected a mature understanding of national interest: in volatile regions, the best policy is often not rhetorical brilliance but *steady, patient, practical diplomacy*.

4.3.3 Balancing Ideology and Practical Diplomacy

India's engagement with revolutionary Iran required a careful balance between ideology and practical diplomacy. Iran's new leadership spoke in the language of Islamic revolution, anti-imperialism and resistance to Western domination. India, however, was a secular democratic republic committed to non-alignment, pluralism and independent foreign policy. The ideological distance was real. Yet diplomacy could not be held hostage to ideological difference. India had to engage Iran as it was, not as India might have preferred it to be.

India's method was to separate Iran's internal ideological identity from bilateral state interests. New Delhi recognized the Islamic Republic without endorsing its ideological model. This distinction was essential. It allowed India to respect Iran's sovereignty while preserving India's own constitutional and diplomatic autonomy. Such a position may be described as *principled pragmatism*: principled because it respected sovereignty and non-interference; pragmatic because it pursued practical interests despite ideological divergence.

The balancing act also involved India's relations with Iraq. During the Iran–Iraq War, India had friendly relations with both countries. Iraq had been an important partner for India, and Iran was historically and strategically significant. India could not afford to sacrifice one relationship for the other. Therefore, it adopted a neutral and cautious position. This neutrality was not

moral indifference; it was a diplomatic necessity shaped by India's interests, non-aligned tradition and regional responsibilities.

India also had to balance its relations with Arab Gulf states. Many Gulf monarchies viewed revolutionary Iran with suspicion and feared ideological subversion. India, however, had large diaspora, energy and trade interests in these states. A visibly pro-Iranian posture would have endangered India's Gulf relations. Conversely, an anti-Iranian posture would have damaged India's ties with Tehran. The only viable path was calibrated balance.

The ideological-practical balance also shaped India's public statements. India generally supported peaceful resolution, respect for sovereignty and non-interference. It avoided inflammatory language. This approach allowed India to maintain credibility with multiple sides. In a region where rhetoric often deepens conflict, India's moderation functioned as a diplomatic asset.

Iran, too, had to practice a measure of pragmatism toward India. Although revolutionary Iran used Islamic language, it also needed relations with large non-Western countries. India was useful because it was not part of the Western alliance system and had a history of anti-colonial diplomacy. Iran could therefore engage India without appearing to surrender revolutionary principles. This mutual pragmatism preserved the relationship.

The balance between ideology and diplomacy became a long-term feature of India–Iran relations. Differences over ideology, regional politics or external alignments did not prevent cooperation in trade, energy and later connectivity. The 1980s taught both sides that survival of relations required flexibility. Ideology could influence language, but practical necessity would shape policy.

In conclusion, India's response to revolutionary Iran demonstrated the maturity of Indian diplomacy. India did not allow ideological difference to produce diplomatic rupture. It did not allow practical interests to erase principles. It did not align blindly with Iran's adversaries or Iran's revolutionary ambitions. Instead, it pursued a middle path of *measured engagement, regional balance and national-interest realism*.

4.4 India–Iran Relations During the 1980s

India–Iran relations during the 1980s were shaped by three major realities: the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, the Iran–Iraq War, and the volatility

of the Persian Gulf. The decade was not conducive to ambitious bilateral expansion. Iran was at war; Iraq was an important Indian partner; Gulf monarchies were anxious; the United States was hostile to Iran; and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan had transformed the regional environment. In such circumstances, India–Iran relations remained important but cautious.

The 1980s may be described as a decade of *restrained continuity*. India preserved diplomatic relations with Iran, maintained economic engagement where possible, and avoided hostile alignment. At the same time, it did not move toward a strategic partnership. The Iran–Iraq War forced India to adopt neutrality and diplomatic caution. Energy concerns required practical contact with Iran, but war and instability limited trade. Regional uncertainty prevented any bold initiative.

Despite these constraints, the decade was important because it tested the resilience of India–Iran relations. If the relationship could survive revolution, war and regional polarization, it possessed deeper durability than ordinary transactional ties. The 1980s proved that India and Iran could maintain engagement even under severe stress. This resilience later facilitated improvement in the 1990s, when the end of the Cold War and changes in Afghanistan created new convergences.

4.4.1 Iran–Iraq War and India’s Position

The Iran–Iraq War, fought from 1980 to 1988, was one of the longest and most destructive wars of the twentieth century. It began when Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, seeking to exploit Iran’s revolutionary turmoil, weaken a rival and assert regional dominance. Iran, despite internal instability and military disorganization after the Revolution, mobilized society for defence. The war soon became a brutal conflict of attrition involving trenches, missile attacks, oil facilities, chemical weapons, human-wave assaults, and extensive casualties. It deeply shaped the political psychology of the Islamic Republic.

India’s position during the Iran–Iraq War was one of neutrality and caution. India had friendly relations with Iraq and also valued relations with Iran. Iraq had been a significant partner in India’s West Asia policy, and India had maintained extensive political and economic engagement with Baghdad. Iran, however, was historically connected to India and remained important for

energy and regional diplomacy. Taking sides would have damaged India's interests. Therefore, New Delhi followed a policy of *careful neutrality*.

India's neutrality was consistent with its non-aligned tradition. India generally opposed aggression and supported peaceful settlement of disputes, but it avoided joining military or ideological camps. In the Iran–Iraq War, India's objective was to preserve relations with both sides, protect Indian nationals, maintain energy supplies and support de-escalation. India did not want the war to widen into a larger regional or superpower conflict. Its position was therefore grounded in *conflict containment* rather than partisan alignment.

The war created a diplomatic dilemma because both Iran and Iraq expected understanding from friendly countries. Iran saw itself as defending the Revolution and national territory against aggression. Iraq presented itself as resisting Iranian revolutionary expansion. India had to listen to both narratives without becoming captive to either. This required diplomatic discipline. Indian statements and actions had to be calibrated so as not to alienate either side excessively.

The Tanker War phase intensified Indian concerns. Attacks on oil tankers and merchant shipping in the Persian Gulf threatened energy routes and global oil markets. For India, the security of maritime commerce was crucial. The Gulf was not an abstract battlefield; it was a vital artery of Indian energy security. India therefore had an interest in keeping the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf sea lanes open. This maritime concern added urgency to India's neutral diplomacy.

India's position also had to consider its relations with the Soviet Union, the United States and Arab countries. The war intersected with wider Cold War politics, but India avoided becoming an instrument of external strategies. It maintained its own assessment. This was a practical application of strategic autonomy before the phrase became common in post-Cold War Indian foreign-policy discourse.

The Iran–Iraq War also affected the future of India–Iran relations. Although the war limited cooperation during the 1980s, India's refusal to become openly hostile to Iran helped preserve goodwill. Iran remembered which countries maintained relations under pressure. India's careful posture ensured

that relations could improve after the war. Thus, neutrality was not merely a wartime tactic; it was an investment in future diplomacy.

In conclusion, India's position during the Iran–Iraq War reflected *non-aligned prudence*, *energy realism* and *regional balance*. India did not abandon Iran, but it did not sacrifice Iraq. It avoided ideological entanglement and preserved diplomatic space. This position allowed India to navigate one of the most dangerous periods in West Asian history without losing long-term strategic options.

4.4.2 Energy and Trade Concerns

Energy and trade concerns were central to India–Iran relations during the 1980s. The Iranian Revolution and Iran–Iraq War disrupted the Persian Gulf's political and economic environment, but India's need for energy and commercial stability continued. Iran remained a significant oil-producing country, and the Gulf remained indispensable to India's energy security. Therefore, even amid war and uncertainty, India had to maintain practical economic engagement with Iran where possible.

The war affected Iran's oil production, export infrastructure and shipping routes. Iraq repeatedly targeted Iranian oil facilities, including Kharg Island, while Iran attempted to continue exports under difficult conditions. The Tanker War created additional risks for ships in the Gulf. Insurance costs, supply uncertainty and price volatility affected importing countries. India, as a developing economy, was vulnerable to such disruptions. Energy security was therefore not merely a commercial issue; it was a national development concern.

India's energy diplomacy in the 1980s required diversification. New Delhi could not depend solely on one supplier or one regional relationship. It maintained relations with Iran, Iraq and Arab Gulf producers. This diversified approach reduced vulnerability. It also reflected India's broader diplomatic method: maintain multiple partnerships, avoid exclusive dependence, and preserve room for manoeuvre. Such *energy pluralism* became a recurring feature of India's West Asia policy.

Trade between India and Iran during the 1980s faced major limitations. War conditions, financial difficulties, disrupted shipping, domestic economic pressures in Iran and India's own controlled economy restricted expansion. Yet trade did not disappear. Essential commodities, oil-related exchange,

agricultural items, pharmaceuticals and other goods remained relevant. Commercial contact helped sustain bilateral relations even when strategic cooperation was limited.

Indian exports to Iran had potential in areas such as tea, rice, textiles, pharmaceuticals, engineering goods and consumer items. Iran's wartime economy required supplies, but payment systems and logistics were complicated. India had to operate carefully within available financial and diplomatic mechanisms. Such trade was often less spectacular than political diplomacy but equally important in preserving relations.

The energy-trade relationship also had a psychological dimension. Iran, isolated by many Western countries and pressured by war, valued partners who maintained economic contact. India's continued engagement signalled that it did not accept total isolation of Iran. At the same time, India avoided actions that would openly antagonize Iraq or Gulf Arab states. This balancing made economic diplomacy delicate but necessary.

Energy concerns also influenced India's assessment of Gulf security. The Iran–Iraq War demonstrated how quickly regional conflict could disrupt global energy flows. India learned that West Asian diplomacy and maritime security were inseparable from economic planning. The Gulf became not merely a source of oil but a strategic region whose instability could affect India's inflation, balance of payments, industrial production and foreign policy.

The 1980s also showed the limits of bilateral economic cooperation in the absence of peace and infrastructure. India and Iran had historical commercial ties, but war prevented the creation of ambitious projects. There was no Chabahar-based strategy, no major connectivity corridor, and no deep investment architecture. The decade was more about preserving trade than expanding it. Yet this preservation mattered because it prevented economic relations from collapsing.

In conclusion, energy and trade concerns during the 1980s kept India–Iran relations practically alive. War and instability restricted cooperation, but India's energy needs and Iran's economic requirements created continued contact. The decade taught India the importance of diversified energy diplomacy and taught Iran the value of reliable Asian partners. These lessons

would later influence the expansion of energy and connectivity discussions in subsequent decades.

4.4.3 Regional Uncertainty and Diplomatic Caution

Regional uncertainty was the dominant atmosphere of India–Iran relations during the 1980s. The Iranian Revolution had overturned the old regional order; the Iran–Iraq War militarized the Persian Gulf; the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 transformed Central and South Asian security; Pakistan gained renewed strategic importance for the United States because of the Afghan jihad; and the Gulf monarchies feared revolutionary instability. In such an environment, India had to act with exceptional caution.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan complicated the regional picture for India and Iran. India had close relations with the Soviet Union and avoided outright condemnation of Moscow, while Iran, despite anti-Americanism, was also wary of Soviet power and concerned about Afghanistan. Pakistan became a frontline state for Western and Saudi-backed support to Afghan mujahideen. This strengthened Pakistan's strategic importance to the United States and altered the regional balance. India and Iran both had reasons to worry about extremism and instability in Afghanistan, but during the 1980s they were not yet able to develop the strong convergence that would appear later in the 1990s against the Taliban.

The Gulf environment was equally uncertain. Iran's revolutionary rhetoric alarmed Arab monarchies, while Iraq's war effort received support from several Arab states. The United States increased its naval involvement in the Gulf, especially during the Tanker War. Superpower presence in the region grew. For India, this was dangerous because any escalation could affect oil supplies, shipping, expatriate safety and relations with multiple West Asian states. Diplomatic caution was therefore not timidity; it was strategic necessity.

India also had to manage domestic sensitivities. As a secular democracy with a large and diverse Muslim population, including Shia communities, India had to prevent West Asian ideological conflicts from influencing domestic harmony. It could not allow sectarian rivalries between Iran and Arab states, or revolutionary Islamic rhetoric, to disturb internal social balance. India's policy therefore emphasized state-to-state relations rather than religious mobilization.

Regional uncertainty also limited the scope of India–Iran strategic cooperation. Iran was preoccupied with survival during the war; India was managing its own regional challenges, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Punjab militancy, economic constraints and Cold War pressures. Neither side was in a position to build an ambitious strategic partnership. Their diplomacy remained cautious, functional and defensive rather than expansive.

Yet caution did not mean neglect. India continued to value Iran’s long-term importance. Indian policymakers understood that Iran’s geography would remain crucial after the war. Iran’s location near the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Arabian Sea gave it enduring relevance. Therefore, India maintained relations even when immediate cooperation was limited. This was *long-horizon diplomacy*.

Iran, too, had reasons to preserve relations with India. During the war, Tehran needed international contacts beyond hostile Western and Arab circles. India’s non-aligned identity and civilizational connection made it a useful and respectable partner. Although India did not openly side with Iran, its willingness to maintain relations had diplomatic value. This helped keep the relationship alive during a difficult decade.

Diplomatic caution also shaped India’s public language. India emphasized peace, restraint, negotiation and respect for sovereignty. It avoided denunciatory rhetoric. Such language allowed India to engage multiple parties while preserving its independent position. In West Asia, where words can have strategic consequences, India’s carefully measured vocabulary was itself an instrument of policy.

In conclusion, regional uncertainty during the 1980s compelled India and Iran to conduct relations with caution. Revolution, war, Gulf militarization, Afghanistan, Pakistan’s renewed strategic role and superpower rivalry created a turbulent environment. India responded with balanced diplomacy; Iran, despite revolutionary ideology, maintained practical contact. The relationship did not flourish dramatically, but it survived. That survival was historically important because it prepared the ground for the post-war and post-Cold War transformation of India–Iran relations in the 1990s.

Concluding Observation

The Iranian Revolution fundamentally transformed Iran’s foreign policy and reshaped India–Iran relations. Iran moved from a pro-Western monarchy to a

revolutionary Islamic Republic. Its foreign policy became marked by *anti-Western orientation, Islamic identity, regional activism* and *strategic suspicion*. India responded not with ideological reaction but with *diplomatic continuity, protection of national interests* and *practical balancing*. During the 1980s, the Iran–Iraq War, energy insecurity and regional uncertainty prevented major expansion of bilateral relations, yet the relationship endured.

The central lesson of this period is that India–Iran relations possess a capacity for survival under pressure. Revolution did not break them; war did not end them; ideological difference did not paralyse them. India’s policy toward revolutionary Iran reflected the deeper logic of Indian foreign policy: *engage all important regional actors, avoid unnecessary entanglement, protect national interests, and preserve strategic autonomy*. Iran, despite its revolutionary transformation, continued to value relations with a major Asian civilization that did not join Western hostility against it. This mutual prudence kept alive a relationship that would later become increasingly important in the context of Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy security and regional connectivity.

Chapter 5:

India–Iran Relations After the Cold War

The end of the Cold War marked a decisive transformation in the architecture of international relations and opened a new chapter in India–Iran relations. The period after 1991 did not merely represent a chronological transition from one decade to another; it represented a structural reconfiguration of world politics, regional diplomacy, economic policy and strategic imagination. The bipolar order, which had constrained India–Iran relations during much of the twentieth century, collapsed with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The United States emerged as the predominant global power, Russia entered a phase of transition, Central Asian republics became independent, Afghanistan entered renewed instability, and West Asia became increasingly shaped by American power, sanctions politics, energy competition, Islamic movements and regional rivalries.

For India, the post-Cold War period coincided with a profound internal transformation. The economic crisis of 1991 compelled India to adopt liberalization, privatization and globalization-oriented reforms. India's foreign policy consequently became more economically outward-looking, commercially pragmatic and connectivity-oriented. The older framework of non-alignment did not disappear, but it evolved into a more flexible doctrine of *strategic autonomy* and *multi-vector engagement*. India began to engage the United States, Russia, Europe, Israel, the Gulf states, Iran, Southeast Asia and Central Asia with greater pragmatism. This new posture created space for a more purposeful relationship with Iran.

For Iran, the post-Cold War period followed the devastation of the Iran–Iraq War and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. Under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and later Mohammad Khatami, Iran searched for reconstruction, economic revival, diplomatic normalization and new external partners. Although Iran remained in conflict with the United States and under varying degrees of international pressure, it also recognized the need for pragmatic engagement with Asian powers. India, with its civilizational connection, growing economy, non-Western identity and strategic independence, emerged as a significant partner in Iran's Asian outlook.

India–Iran relations after the Cold War therefore moved gradually from *restrained continuity* to *strategic convergence*. This convergence did not mean a formal alliance. It meant the discovery of common interests in energy, Afghanistan, Central Asia, connectivity, trade, counter-terrorism, cultural diplomacy and regional stability. The post-1991 period made both countries understand that their historical relationship could be converted into contemporary geopolitical utility. Iran could help India overcome its blocked land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia; India could provide Iran with a major Asian partner beyond Western hostility and regional isolation.

5.1 Global Changes After 1991

The year 1991 was a watershed in world politics. The Cold War ended, the Soviet Union disintegrated, ideological bipolarity weakened, and the United States became the central power in the international system. The old rules of alignment, bloc discipline and superpower competition were replaced by a new but unstable order. This new order was marked by American predominance, economic globalization, expansion of international financial institutions, growth of regional organizations, technological integration, and the emergence of new security anxieties such as terrorism, sanctions, energy insecurity and ethnic conflicts. The world moved from the rigid certainties of *bipolarity* to the uncertain fluidity of *post-Cold War multipolar aspiration under unipolar dominance*.

For India and Iran, these changes had deep consequences. India lost the Soviet Union as a stable strategic partner at precisely the time when its economy faced severe crisis. Iran, emerging from the Iran–Iraq War, faced reconstruction challenges and continuing Western hostility. Central Asia's independence created new geopolitical possibilities for both countries. Afghanistan's instability, especially the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, created shared security concerns. The Persian Gulf became more heavily shaped by American power after the 1991 Gulf War. These developments made India and Iran reconsider each other's importance.

The global changes after 1991 also altered the meaning of geography. During the Cold War, geography was mainly understood through military blocs and containment. After 1991, geography increasingly became linked with *connectivity, energy corridors, ports, pipelines, markets, trade routes and regional access*. Iran's location between the Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea,

Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean became extremely valuable for India's post-Cold War ambitions. India's western seaboard and growing economic strength became important for Iran's search for diversified partners. Thus, global change converted older civilizational ties into new geoeconomic possibilities.

5.1.1 End of Bipolar World Order

The end of the bipolar world order was one of the most consequential events for India–Iran relations. During the Cold War, India and Iran had been positioned differently within the global strategic structure. India followed *non-alignment* but developed strong defence and political ties with the Soviet Union, especially from the 1960s onward. Iran under the Shah had been closely aligned with the United States and Western security arrangements, while revolutionary Iran after 1979 became fiercely anti-Western and suspicious of both superpowers. These alignments limited the scope of deep bilateral cooperation. After 1991, the collapse of bipolarity reduced some of these older constraints.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union compelled India to rethink its foreign policy. India could no longer depend upon the Soviet Union as a predictable strategic partner, defence supplier and diplomatic supporter in the same way as before. This forced New Delhi to diversify its external relations. India began to improve relations with the United States, deepen ties with Southeast Asia through the *Look East Policy*, normalize relations with Israel, expand engagement with the Gulf, and explore new possibilities in Central Asia and Iran. This was not abandonment of strategic autonomy; it was its adaptation to a changed world.

For Iran, the end of bipolarity produced both opportunity and danger. On one hand, the Soviet threat diminished, and newly independent Central Asian republics opened new avenues for Iranian diplomacy. Iran could present itself as a cultural, geographic and economic bridge between the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and the Caucasus. On the other hand, American predominance increased. The 1991 Gulf War strengthened the American military presence in West Asia, and Washington's policy toward Iran remained hostile. Thus, Iran faced a paradox: a more open regional map but a more powerful American strategic presence.

The end of bipolarity also increased the importance of regionalism. States could no longer define their policies only through superpower alignments. They had to create regional partnerships, economic corridors and flexible diplomatic arrangements. India and Iran both understood this. India needed access to Central Asia and Afghanistan; Iran needed economic reconstruction and diplomatic diversification. The new independent republics of Central Asia created a shared area of interest. Iran's geographic position made it one of the natural routes for India's access to this region.

Afghanistan became a major site of post-Cold War convergence. After the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the Najibullah government, Afghanistan entered civil war. The rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s alarmed both India and Iran. India saw the Taliban as supported by Pakistan and hostile to Indian interests. Iran viewed the Taliban's anti-Shia extremism and Pakistan-backed influence as a direct security threat. This shared concern created one of the strongest strategic convergences between India and Iran in the 1990s. Both supported forces opposed to the Taliban, especially the Northern Alliance. Thus, the end of bipolarity allowed India and Iran to discover practical security overlap.

The end of the Cold War also changed India's understanding of West Asia. Earlier, India had often viewed West Asia through anti-colonial solidarity, oil needs and Pakistan-related diplomacy. After 1991, West Asia became part of India's broader economic and strategic outreach. Energy security, diaspora welfare, trade, investment, counter-terrorism, maritime routes and connectivity became more prominent. Iran, as a major West Asian and Eurasian state, became central to this new outlook.

In analytical terms, the end of bipolarity converted India–Iran relations from a relationship constrained by ideological blocs into a relationship shaped by *functional convergence*. The two countries still had differences, but the older Cold War structures no longer dictated their choices. This gave both sides greater diplomatic room. The post-1991 world was uncertain, but uncertainty also created opportunity. India and Iran used that opportunity gradually, cautiously and strategically.

5.1.2 India's Economic Liberalization

India's economic liberalization after 1991 was one of the most important domestic transformations affecting its foreign policy. The balance-of-

payments crisis, foreign-exchange shortage and structural weaknesses of the Indian economy compelled the government led by Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to introduce major reforms. These reforms reduced licensing controls, encouraged foreign investment, liberalized trade, restructured industrial policy and opened the Indian economy to global markets. The old model of protected, state-dominated economic nationalism gave way to a more outward-looking, competitive and market-oriented approach.

This economic transformation had major diplomatic consequences. A more open Indian economy required energy, markets, investment, technology, shipping routes and external partnerships. Foreign policy could no longer remain primarily political and ideological; it had to become economic and geostrategic. India's relations with West Asia, including Iran, acquired new importance because the region supplied energy, hosted Indian workers, offered markets and connected India to wider Eurasian routes. Economic liberalization therefore gave material urgency to India–Iran relations.

Energy security became particularly significant. Liberalization accelerated economic growth, industrial expansion, transport development and urbanization. These processes increased India's demand for oil and gas. Iran, with its large hydrocarbon reserves and geographic proximity, became a natural partner in India's energy calculations. Although sanctions and geopolitical pressures later complicated energy trade, the structural logic remained powerful: India needed reliable and diversified energy sources, and Iran needed large Asian markets. Thus, economic liberalization increased India's interest in Iran as an energy partner.

Liberalization also made connectivity more important. A growing economy requires routes to markets. India's access to Central Asia remained constrained by Pakistan's denial of transit. Iran offered an alternative. The strategic value of Iranian ports and transport networks became more visible in the post-liberalization period. India's interest in Chabahar and later the International North–South Transport Corridor emerged from this broader economic logic. India was no longer content with symbolic historical friendship; it wanted physical corridors, commercial routes and geoeconomic instruments.

India's liberalization also changed the style of Indian diplomacy. Indian foreign policy began to emphasize trade agreements, investment partnerships,

energy dialogues, infrastructure development, technology cooperation and private-sector opportunities. This economic diplomacy was visible in India's engagement with Southeast Asia, the United States, Europe, the Gulf and Iran. The relationship with Iran began to be discussed not only in terms of culture and politics, but also in terms of oil, gas, ports, transport corridors, pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, agriculture and regional markets.

The post-1991 reforms also strengthened India's confidence. As the Indian economy grew, India's diplomatic profile improved. Iran began to see India not merely as a historically friendly country but as an emerging economic power. This changed the psychological basis of the relationship. India could offer Iran trade, technology, pharmaceuticals, education, industrial cooperation and a large market. Iran could offer India energy, transit geography and access to Central Asia. The relationship thus moved toward *mutual instrumental relevance*.

At the same time, liberalization created new constraints. India's integration with global markets made it more sensitive to American sanctions and international financial restrictions. This later affected India's energy trade with Iran and banking arrangements. The more India integrated with global finance, the more it had to consider the consequences of sanctions on Iran. Thus, economic liberalization both increased India's interest in Iran and increased India's vulnerability to external pressures on that relationship.

In conclusion, India's economic liberalization transformed India–Iran relations by giving them a stronger economic and geostrategic foundation. It increased India's need for energy, markets, routes and diversified partnerships. It made Iran important not only as a civilizational partner but as a *geoeconomic gateway*. The liberalization of India's economy therefore created the domestic foundation for the post-Cold War expansion of India–Iran relations.

5.1.3 Iran's Search for New Partners

Iran's search for new partners after the Cold War was shaped by the devastation of the Iran–Iraq War, continuing hostility with the United States, economic reconstruction needs, sanctions pressures and the emergence of new geopolitical spaces in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 and the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani marked a phase of reconstruction and pragmatic adjustment. Iran needed

capital, technology, markets, diplomatic legitimacy and regional stability. It could not remain permanently enclosed within revolutionary isolation.

Iran's foreign policy in the 1990s therefore acquired a more pragmatic tone, even though revolutionary principles remained part of the state's identity. Rafsanjani emphasized reconstruction, economic revival and regional engagement. Later, President Mohammad Khatami promoted the idea of dialogue among civilizations and attempted to soften Iran's international image. These efforts did not eliminate Iran's tensions with the United States, but they indicated that Tehran was searching for wider diplomatic space. India became relevant in this search because it was a major Asian country with historical ties, economic potential and non-Western diplomatic identity.

Iran's need for partners was also linked to sanctions. American hostility limited Iran's access to Western finance, technology and markets. This pushed Iran toward Asia, including India, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia. Iran's *Look East* orientation was not only ideological; it was also economic necessity. Asia offered energy markets, investment possibilities, diplomatic support and alternatives to Western pressure. India, as a large and growing energy consumer, naturally attracted Iranian interest.

The emergence of Central Asian republics created a new field for Iranian diplomacy. Iran shared cultural, linguistic, religious or historical connections with several parts of Central Asia and the Caucasus. It sought to present itself as a transit route and regional connector. This ambition overlapped with India's need to reach Central Asia. Iran's ports, roads and railways could connect the Indian Ocean with Central Asia and Russia. Therefore, Iran's search for partners and India's search for access converged.

Iran also wanted to reduce excessive dependence on any single external partner. Although China and Russia became important for Iran, Tehran understood the risks of overdependence. India offered a different kind of relationship. It was not a Western ally in the military sense, it had a tradition of independent foreign policy, and it shared civilizational memories with Iran. India could therefore serve as a partner of diversification. For Iran, relations with India helped strengthen its Asian diplomacy without making Iran wholly dependent on either Beijing or Moscow.

The Afghanistan question further increased Iran's interest in India. The rise of the Taliban created serious concerns in Tehran. The Taliban's sectarian

hostility toward Shias, its links with Pakistan and its extremist ideology threatened Iranian security and influence. India shared many of these concerns. Both countries were opposed to Taliban domination and supported anti-Taliban forces. Thus, Iran's search for partners included a security dimension: it needed countries that understood the danger of Pakistan-backed extremism in Afghanistan. India was one such country.

Iran's search for new partners also had a cultural dimension. The Islamic Republic did not abandon Iran's civilizational identity; it continued to value Persian heritage, cultural diplomacy and historical memory. India, with its Indo-Persian legacy, Persian manuscripts, Sufi traditions and Parsi community, was a natural civilizational interlocutor. In an international environment where Iran was often viewed only through sanctions, nuclear controversy or revolutionary politics, India could engage Iran through a broader historical lens. This gave the relationship unusual dignity.

Thus, Iran's search for new partners after the Cold War created a favourable environment for India–Iran engagement. Iran needed reconstruction, markets, transit cooperation, diplomatic diversification and regional partners. India needed energy, access, Central Asian outreach and Afghanistan-related cooperation. The two countries did not become allies, but they became increasingly relevant to each other. This was the beginning of a new phase of *strategic convergence without formal alliance*.

5.2 New Strategic Convergence

The post-Cold War period produced a new strategic convergence between India and Iran. This convergence emerged not from ideological similarity but from practical geopolitical overlap. India and Iran discovered common interests in Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy security, regional connectivity, counter-terrorism and multipolar diplomacy. The relationship began to move beyond older cultural goodwill and cautious diplomacy toward more substantive engagement. It acquired the vocabulary of *connectivity*, *energy partnership*, *regional stability*, *strategic autonomy* and *Eurasian access*.

The convergence became visible in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Taliban's rise in Afghanistan brought India and Iran closer. Both opposed the Taliban's extremist ideology and Pakistan-backed influence. Both viewed Afghanistan as a key space in regional security. At the same time, India's need for access to Central Asia and Iran's desire to become a transit hub created economic

overlap. The idea of using Iranian territory and ports for India's westward and northward outreach began to gain strategic importance.

High-level diplomacy provided formal expression to this convergence. The 2001 *Tehran Declaration* and the 2003 *New Delhi Declaration* marked important milestones. They expanded cooperation in political dialogue, energy, trade, technology, transport, culture and regional affairs. These documents represented the transition from civilizational friendship to strategic partnership language. They did not eliminate constraints, especially American pressure and sanctions, but they articulated a shared vision.

New strategic convergence also reflected India's changing West Asia policy. India gradually moved from a reactive, oil-and-diaspora-centred approach toward a more proactive engagement with the region. Iran became one pillar of this engagement, alongside the Gulf Arab states and Israel. India's challenge was to build relations with all without becoming trapped in their rivalries. This required sophisticated balancing. Iran's importance lay in its energy resources, geopolitical location, Afghanistan role, Central Asian access and civilizational ties.

5.2.1 India's Look West Policy

India's *Look West Policy* emerged as a strategic recognition that West Asia was not merely a region of oil imports and expatriate labour, but a vital theatre of India's external engagement. The term became more prominent in the mid-2000s, particularly when Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh emphasized the need to deepen cooperation with the Gulf and West Asia. However, the roots of this policy lay in the post-1991 transformation of India's economy and diplomacy. As India liberalized, expanded trade, required more energy, and sought wider strategic space, West Asia became indispensable.

The *Look West Policy* may be understood as India's attempt to give a coherent strategic framework to its western extended neighbourhood. It included the Gulf Arab states, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Turkey and the wider West Asian region. Its central concerns were energy security, trade, investment, diaspora welfare, counter-terrorism, maritime security, food security, technology, defence cooperation and regional stability. Iran occupied a special place within this framework because it was not only a West Asian state but also a gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia.

India's Look West approach differed from older West Asia policy in its intensity and pragmatism. During the Cold War, India's West Asia policy had been shaped by anti-colonial solidarity, support for Palestine, oil needs and Pakistan-related diplomacy. After the Cold War, India retained many older principles but added new strategic layers. It normalized relations with Israel, expanded partnerships with Gulf monarchies, maintained ties with Iran, and increased attention to maritime security and counter-terrorism. This was not a policy of choosing one side; it was a policy of *multi-alignment in a fractured region*.

Iran's importance in the Look West Policy arises from geography. India's direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is blocked by Pakistan. Iran provides an alternative through Chabahar and overland routes. This makes Iran indispensable for India's continental aspirations. Without Iran, India's access to Eurasia remains heavily constrained. With Iran, India can imagine a route from the Indian Ocean to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. Thus, Iran is the *continental hinge* of India's Look West imagination.

Energy security was another major reason for Iran's importance. India's economic growth after liberalization increased demand for oil and gas. Iran's hydrocarbon resources made it a natural partner. Although sanctions later limited oil imports and energy projects, India's interest in Iranian energy remained structurally understandable. Energy diplomacy with Iran reflected India's desire for diversification and long-term supply security. In this sense, Iran was both an energy partner and a strategic variable in India's broader energy calculus.

Afghanistan gave India and Iran a powerful reason for cooperation under the Look West framework. The Taliban's rise in the 1990s created shared concern. Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan threatened India's security and Iran's regional interests. Both India and Iran supported anti-Taliban forces and desired an Afghanistan that was not dominated by extremist forces. This created a rare convergence in security outlook. Afghanistan thus became the strategic meeting ground of India's Look West policy and Iran's regional security concerns.

Chabahar became the material symbol of India's Look West policy toward Iran. A port is never only a port in geopolitics; it is an instrument of access, influence and resilience. Chabahar offers India the possibility of reaching

Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan. It also gives Iran investment, infrastructure and enhanced transit relevance. The port embodies the conversion of diplomatic intent into physical geography. It is therefore one of the most important projects in India–Iran relations.

The International North–South Transport Corridor further strengthened the Look West logic. The INSTC aims to connect India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through multimodal transport. This corridor reflects the geoeconomic transformation of foreign policy. India’s Look West Policy is not merely about embassies and visits; it is about routes, ports, logistics, customs, railways and shipping. Iran is central to this because of its location between the Indian Ocean and Eurasia.

India’s Look West Policy also required careful balancing. Iran’s rivalry with the United States, Israel and several Arab states meant that India could not pursue Iran relations in isolation. India had to maintain productive relations with Iran while deepening ties with the Gulf states and Israel. This balancing is one of the most sophisticated features of Indian diplomacy. It demonstrates that India’s strategic autonomy is not withdrawal from complexity; it is the ability to operate within complexity.

The policy also had a cultural dimension. India’s relationship with Iran under the Look West framework was strengthened by Indo-Persian heritage, Sufi traditions, Persian language, Parsi history and shared civilizational memory. While energy and connectivity gave material substance to the relationship, culture gave it emotional legitimacy. This combination of *hard interests* and *soft civilizational capital* made India–Iran relations distinctive within India’s West Asia policy.

However, the Look West Policy faced limitations. American sanctions on Iran, Iran’s nuclear controversy, instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s obstruction, slow infrastructure development, financial restrictions and regional tensions constrained India–Iran cooperation. India often had to move cautiously to avoid secondary sanctions or diplomatic friction with other partners. These constraints revealed the difference between strategic aspiration and operational reality. Yet the persistence of India’s interest in Iran shows that geography repeatedly overcomes temporary obstruction.

In conclusion, India’s Look West Policy gave India–Iran relations a more structured strategic foundation after the Cold War. It recognized Iran as a

gateway to energy, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasian connectivity. It integrated Iran into India's broader West Asian diplomacy while requiring careful balancing with Arab states, Israel and the United States. The policy transformed Iran from a historically friendly country into a functional partner in India's extended-neighbourhood strategy. In the refined language of geopolitics, Iran became the *western aperture of India's continental ambition* and a crucial pillar of India's post-Cold War strategic outreach.

5.2.2 Iran's Importance in India's Extended Neighbourhood

Iran occupies a position of exceptional importance in India's *extended neighbourhood*. The term *extended neighbourhood* refers to those regions beyond India's immediate territorial frontiers that directly affect India's security, energy, economy, connectivity, diaspora, maritime interests and strategic autonomy. In this conceptual geography, Iran is not an ordinary West Asian state; it is a *geostrategic hinge* between South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian region and the wider Eurasian landmass. Its importance for India is derived from its geography, resources, civilizational depth, regional influence and capacity to provide alternative access to territories from which India is otherwise geographically constrained.

Iran's strategic importance begins with its location. It borders the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman in the south, connects to the Caspian region in the north, lies near Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east, and opens toward Iraq, Turkey and the Arab world in the west. Such a location makes Iran a country of *multiple geopolitical frontiers*. It is simultaneously maritime and continental, West Asian and Eurasian, Islamic and Persianate, energy-rich and transit-oriented. For India, whose direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is obstructed by Pakistan, Iran provides the most plausible western corridor. Thus, Iran helps India overcome what may be called the *cartographic handicap of Partition*.

India's extended neighbourhood policy is shaped by the need to look beyond the subcontinent. A great power cannot remain confined within its immediate borders. India's economic growth, energy dependence, maritime interests, counter-terrorism concerns and aspirations for global influence require active engagement with West Asia, Central Asia, Africa, the Indian Ocean and Eurasia. Iran lies at the intersection of several of these theatres. Therefore,

India's engagement with Iran is not episodic; it is structural. It arises from the deeper logic of India's rise as a continental-maritime power.

Iran is indispensable for India's Central Asian outreach. The Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—are rich in energy, minerals, strategic location and historical connections with India. Yet India's access to Central Asia is limited by geography. Pakistan blocks the direct land route; Afghanistan remains unstable; China has developed strong infrastructure influence in the region; and Russia retains historical strategic depth. Iran, through its ports, roads, railways and Caspian connections, offers India a route into Central Asia that is less dependent upon Pakistan-controlled transit. This makes Iran a *gateway state* in India's Eurasian imagination.

Chabahar Port is the most visible expression of Iran's importance in India's extended neighbourhood. Located on Iran's south-eastern coast along the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar gives India access to Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its strategic value lies not merely in commerce but in *geopolitical access*. It allows India to bypass Pakistan and create an independent route to the continental interior of Asia. A port of this nature is not merely an infrastructure project; it is a *geostrategic aperture*. It opens a blocked geography and gives India a physical instrument for regional outreach.

Iran also matters because of Afghanistan. India has historically supported a stable, sovereign and plural Afghanistan. However, Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban, terrorism, narcotics, refugee flows and extremist networks have repeatedly created concern for India. Iran shares a long border with Afghanistan and has deep political, cultural, economic and security interests there. It has concerns regarding refugees, water, narcotics, border security, Shia communities and extremist groups. Thus, Iran is a necessary actor in any serious Indian assessment of Afghanistan. India cannot develop an effective long-term Afghan policy without understanding Iran's role.

Iran's energy resources also make it important in India's extended neighbourhood. India is a major energy-consuming economy. Its industrialization, transport expansion, urbanization and developmental requirements make energy security a central concern of foreign policy. Iran possesses major oil and gas reserves and has historically been a significant potential supplier for India. Although sanctions and geopolitical pressures

have constrained energy cooperation, the structural complementarity remains evident. India needs diversified energy sources; Iran needs large Asian markets. This energy relationship gives Iran enduring relevance in India's economic diplomacy.

The Persian Gulf is another crucial factor. A large part of India's energy imports and maritime trade passes through West Asian sea lanes. Millions of Indians live and work in Gulf countries, and remittances from the region contribute to India's economy. Any crisis involving Iran can affect shipping, oil prices, insurance costs, diaspora safety and regional stability. Iran's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most vital energy chokepoints, gives it enormous strategic importance. India therefore has a direct interest in maintaining channels of communication with Tehran.

Iran also provides India with a diplomatic balancing opportunity in West Asia. India has deep relations with the Gulf Arab monarchies, strong ties with Israel, historical support for Palestine, and growing interaction with the United States and Europe. At the same time, India cannot ignore Iran. A foreign policy that excludes Iran would be geopolitically incomplete. India's engagement with Iran is therefore part of its larger strategy of *multi-alignment*. India seeks friendship with multiple regional powers without becoming prisoner of their rivalries. This requires delicate diplomatic craftsmanship, and Iran is central to that balancing.

In the context of China and Pakistan, Iran's importance acquires additional significance. Pakistan's geography has historically limited India's continental access. China's Belt and Road Initiative and its partnership with Pakistan through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor have increased India's need for alternative routes. While India's Iran policy should not be reduced to anti-China or anti-Pakistan logic, Chabahar does provide India with strategic space in a region where China and Pakistan have attempted to shape connectivity. Iran thus helps India avoid *strategic encirclement* and *connectivity marginalization*.

Iran also matters in multilateral and Eurasian forums. With the growing relevance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS-related mechanisms, the International North–South Transport Corridor and regional connectivity platforms, Iran has become an important participant in emerging non-Western and Eurasian alignments. India's engagement with Iran allows New Delhi to participate more effectively in these networks. In a world where

power is increasingly dispersed across multiple centres, Iran provides India with a valuable diplomatic partner in the search for *multipolar equilibrium*.

The civilizational dimension adds further depth to Iran's importance. India's relations with Iran are not based only on oil, ports and strategy. Persian language, Indo-Persian literature, Sufi traditions, Mughal architecture, Parsi heritage, trade memory and shared intellectual history create a reservoir of goodwill. This cultural inheritance gives political engagement a dignity that purely transactional relationships often lack. In the vocabulary of diplomacy, Iran is both a *strategic partner of necessity* and a *civilizational partner of memory*.

Therefore, Iran's importance in India's extended neighbourhood is multidimensional. It is a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, a major energy actor, a maritime factor in the Gulf, a balancing pole in West Asia, a partner in connectivity, a participant in Eurasian forums, and a civilizational interlocutor. For India, Iran is not merely west of Pakistan; it is the western bridge to Asia's continental heartland. Its significance lies in the fact that it converts India's blocked geography into a field of strategic possibility.

5.2.3 Shared Concerns in Afghanistan and Central Asia

Afghanistan and Central Asia have been among the most important areas of India–Iran strategic convergence after the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of independent Central Asian republics, the civil war in Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban, and Pakistan's increasing role in Afghan affairs created a new regional environment in which Indian and Iranian interests began to overlap more clearly. Afghanistan became the immediate theatre of shared concern, while Central Asia became the wider zone of shared opportunity. Together, they gave India–Iran relations a new *continental orientation*.

Afghanistan has long been central to India's strategic imagination. It has functioned historically as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. It has also been a space where external powers and regional rivalries have repeatedly intersected. For India, Afghanistan matters because of security, connectivity, historical ties, development cooperation and Pakistan's use of Afghan territory for strategic depth. For Iran, Afghanistan matters because of geography, border security, refugees, water issues, narcotics

trafficking, Shia communities, trade routes and regional influence. Therefore, Afghanistan naturally brings India and Iran into strategic conversation.

The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s created a powerful convergence between India and Iran. The Taliban's ideological extremism, sectarian tendencies, links with Pakistan and hostility toward plural political forces alarmed both countries. India viewed the Taliban as a Pakistan-backed force that could deepen anti-India militancy and reduce Indian influence in Afghanistan. Iran viewed the Taliban as a threat to its eastern security, its Shia co-religionists, and its regional interests. The killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 brought Iran and the Taliban close to war. This period gave India and Iran a shared interest in resisting Taliban domination.

Both India and Iran supported anti-Taliban forces, especially the Northern Alliance. This did not necessarily make their policies identical, but it created a clear security overlap. India provided diplomatic, humanitarian and political support to anti-Taliban elements; Iran provided significant support based on its own security and ideological concerns. Russia and some Central Asian states also shared concerns regarding Taliban expansion. Thus, Afghanistan became a theatre in which India and Iran found themselves on the same side of a major regional divide.

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, India and Iran both supported the reconstruction of Afghanistan. India invested in infrastructure, education, health, Parliament building, roads, dams, scholarships and capacity-building programmes. Iran also maintained economic, cultural and political links with Afghanistan. Both countries preferred a stable Afghanistan that would not become a sanctuary for terrorism or a base for Pakistan-backed extremist groups. This convergence strengthened the political rationale for India–Iran cooperation.

Chabahar became directly connected to Afghanistan's future. By using Chabahar, India could send goods to Afghanistan without relying on Pakistani transit. This was a major strategic achievement because Afghanistan's landlocked geography made it vulnerable to transit pressure. Chabahar gave Afghanistan an alternative outlet to the sea and gave India a route into Afghanistan. Iran's territory thus became a bridge between India and Afghanistan. In this sense, India–Iran cooperation served not only bilateral interests but also Afghanistan's economic sovereignty.

The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 introduced new complexities. India and Iran had to adjust to a changed Afghan reality. Both countries were concerned about terrorism, extremism, minority rights, humanitarian conditions and regional instability. However, both also recognized the need for pragmatic engagement to protect their interests. Iran's approach to the Taliban became more cautious and interest-driven, while India also reopened limited engagement for humanitarian and diplomatic purposes. This demonstrates that India–Iran convergence in Afghanistan is not static; it evolves with circumstances.

Central Asia forms the wider strategic horizon of India–Iran cooperation. The independence of Central Asian republics after 1991 created new possibilities for India, but geographical access remained the central problem. These republics are rich in hydrocarbons, uranium, minerals, agricultural resources and strategic location. They also possess cultural and historical connections with India through Buddhism, Sufism, Persianate culture, trade routes and medieval political movements. Yet without access through Iran, India's connection to Central Asia remains logistically difficult. Iran's geography therefore becomes indispensable.

Iran itself seeks to be a transit state linking the Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea, Central Asia and South Asia. This Iranian ambition overlaps with India's need for continental access. The International North–South Transport Corridor is central to this overlap. It connects India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through sea, road and rail networks. For India, it offers a shorter and more diversified route to Eurasia. For Iran, it enhances its status as a *corridor state*. For Central Asia, it provides another route to global markets. Thus, the corridor is not merely economic; it is geopolitical.

India's shared concerns with Iran in Central Asia also include extremism, narcotics, instability and external domination. Both countries have an interest in preventing radical groups from spreading across Afghanistan into Central Asia. Both have concerns regarding terrorism networks that may affect regional security. Both support connectivity that respects sovereignty and offers alternatives to monopolistic routes. This makes their Central Asian cooperation part of a larger strategy of *regional resilience*.

However, India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan and Central Asia has faced constraints. Sanctions on Iran have slowed infrastructure and banking cooperation. Afghanistan's instability has disrupted transit plans. Pakistan's

geography remains obstructive. China's economic presence in Central Asia is far stronger than India's. Russia retains security influence. Central Asian states themselves pursue multi-vector foreign policies and avoid excessive dependence on any one external power. Therefore, India and Iran must operate within a competitive and complex strategic environment.

Despite these constraints, the convergence remains important. Afghanistan and Central Asia give India–Iran relations a purpose beyond bilateral symbolism. They convert civilizational memory into regional strategy. They make Iran not merely an energy partner but a connectivity partner. They make India not merely a cultural friend but a serious stakeholder in Iran's eastward and northward regional vision. The shared concerns in Afghanistan and Central Asia have therefore become one of the strongest pillars of post-Cold War India–Iran relations.

5.3 Growth of Political Engagement

The growth of political engagement between India and Iran after the Cold War was gradual, deliberate and strategically meaningful. The relationship did not become an alliance, but it developed a denser diplomatic architecture. High-level visits, bilateral declarations, institutional mechanisms, foreign office consultations, joint commissions, security dialogues and connectivity agreements created a framework for sustained engagement. The earlier relationship of cautious cordiality began to acquire a more purposeful and policy-oriented character.

The political engagement grew because both countries discovered that their interests were increasingly complementary. India needed energy, access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, cooperation against extremism, and a stable relationship with a major West Asian power. Iran needed Asian partners, economic cooperation, diplomatic diversification, reconstruction support and connectivity with the Indian Ocean. This mutual relevance produced a new diplomatic seriousness. Political engagement was no longer a ceremonial expression of historical friendship; it became an instrument of strategic management.

The growth of engagement also reflected India's broader transformation after 1991. India's economy opened, its diplomacy became more pragmatic, and its strategic horizons expanded. Iran, meanwhile, emerged from war and isolation in search of reconstruction and regional opportunities. The result

was a relationship that could now be discussed in the vocabulary of *strategic convergence*, *energy partnership*, *regional connectivity* and *multipolar cooperation*. Political engagement gave institutional form to this new vocabulary.

5.3.1 High-Level Visits

High-level visits played a crucial role in reviving and deepening India–Iran relations after the Cold War. Such visits are not merely diplomatic rituals. In international relations, visits by presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and senior officials create political momentum, signal seriousness, resolve bureaucratic hesitation and frame the relationship within a larger strategic vision. In the India–Iran case, post-Cold War visits helped convert historical goodwill into contemporary cooperation.

One of the important early post-Cold War moments was the visit of Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to India in 1995. Rafsanjani represented Iran’s post-war reconstruction phase and pragmatic foreign-policy adjustment. His visit helped revive political engagement after the turbulent 1980s. It suggested that Iran valued India as a significant Asian partner and that India was prepared to deal with post-revolution Iran in practical terms. The visit also occurred in a period when Afghanistan and Central Asia were becoming increasingly important to both countries.

The visit of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Iran in April 2001 was a landmark. It produced the *Tehran Declaration*, which gave a new strategic direction to bilateral relations. The declaration emphasized political dialogue, economic cooperation, regional stability, transport links, energy and cultural ties. It reflected a shared recognition that India and Iran needed to move beyond ordinary diplomatic contact toward structured cooperation. The visit was particularly significant because it occurred at a time when Afghanistan was still under Taliban influence and both India and Iran had strong concerns about extremism.

The visit of Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami to India in January 2003 was another major milestone. President Khatami was invited as the Chief Guest at India’s Republic Day, an honour of great symbolic importance. His visit produced the *New Delhi Declaration*, which deepened the strategic understanding created by the Tehran Declaration. Khatami’s idea of *Dialogue Among Civilizations* resonated strongly with India’s

civilizational outlook. The visit symbolized both cultural affinity and strategic convergence. It showed that India and Iran could speak the language of civilization while pursuing concrete political and economic cooperation.

Later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016 gave new impetus to the relationship. The joint statement titled *Civilizational Connect, Contemporary Context* beautifully captured the dual nature of India–Iran relations: ancient in cultural memory and modern in strategic relevance. During this period, Chabahar, trade, transport and trilateral connectivity with Afghanistan acquired major importance. The visit represented the transformation of India–Iran relations into a connectivity-centred partnership.

The state visit of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to India in February 2018 continued this trajectory. The visit emphasized connectivity, energy, trade, cultural cooperation and regional dialogue. It also occurred in a complex international environment shaped by uncertainty around the Iran nuclear agreement and American policy. India used the visit to reaffirm engagement with Iran while maintaining its wider diplomatic balancing. Such visits demonstrated that India was willing to engage Tehran even under external pressure, provided the engagement served India's interests.

Foreign minister-level visits and meetings have also sustained engagement. Regular contact between External Affairs Ministers, Deputy Foreign Ministers, Foreign Secretaries and senior officials has allowed India and Iran to discuss bilateral issues, regional developments, Afghanistan, Chabahar, trade payments, consular matters and multilateral cooperation. These interactions are important because they keep the relationship alive even when summit-level visits are infrequent. Diplomacy requires not only grand gestures but continuous institutional conversation.

The 20th India–Iran Joint Commission Meeting in New Delhi in 2025, co-chaired by the foreign ministers of both countries, reflected the persistence of high-level political engagement. It indicated that despite sanctions, regional turbulence and international pressure, both sides continued to value structured dialogue. Such meetings confirm that India–Iran relations have acquired institutional resilience. They are no longer dependent only on occasional symbolic visits.

High-level visits, therefore, have acted as political accelerators in India–Iran relations. They have produced declarations, agreements, institutional

mechanisms and strategic clarity. They have also conveyed mutual respect. In a region where alignments are fluid and pressures are intense, the continuation of high-level engagement itself becomes a form of *diplomatic signalling*. It tells the world that India and Iran may have constraints, but they also have enduring reasons to remain engaged.

5.3.2 Bilateral Agreements

Bilateral agreements between India and Iran have given legal, institutional and operational substance to their post-Cold War engagement. Declarations, memoranda of understanding, trade arrangements, connectivity agreements, cultural exchange programmes and port contracts have all contributed to the gradual construction of a bilateral architecture. Such agreements are important because they convert political intention into administrative obligation. They transform diplomatic language into policy instruments.

The *Tehran Declaration* of 2001 was one of the earliest and most important post-Cold War documents. It established a broad vision for cooperation in political dialogue, economic relations, energy, transport, technology, culture and regional affairs. It recognized that India and Iran had common interests in peace, stability and development. The declaration was significant because it came at a time when both countries were concerned about the Taliban and regional extremism. It therefore reflected strategic convergence as well as diplomatic goodwill.

The *New Delhi Declaration* of 2003 further deepened the framework. It reaffirmed the Tehran Declaration and expanded cooperation in energy, trade, transport, science, technology, security dialogue and cultural relations. It also gave India–Iran relations a more explicit strategic dimension. The 2003 declaration is often regarded as a major moment in the political revival of India–Iran relations. It suggested that both countries were ready to think of each other as long-term partners, not merely historical friends.

Connectivity agreements became increasingly important after 2003. The most important among them was the Chabahar-related framework. Chabahar is central because it connects India's maritime capabilities with Iran's continental geography. Agreements concerning Chabahar, transport and transit gave operational meaning to India's desire to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia through Iran. The 2016 Trilateral Agreement on Establishment of International Transport and Transit Corridor among India, Iran and

Afghanistan represented a significant diplomatic step. It placed Chabahar within a regional framework rather than treating it only as a bilateral port project.

The 2024 long-term contract for development and operation of the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar marked another major milestone. It showed that despite sanctions, delays and external pressure, both countries remained committed to the port's strategic potential. The agreement gave greater continuity to India's role in Chabahar and reinforced the idea that India–Iran connectivity cooperation has long-term significance. In strategic language, it gave institutional durability to a project of *regional access*.

Energy-related agreements and discussions have also formed an important part of bilateral engagement. India and Iran have explored cooperation in oil, gas, petrochemicals, fertilizers and energy infrastructure. Several proposed projects have faced difficulties because of sanctions, pricing, investment risk and geopolitical pressure. Nevertheless, the energy dialogue remains important because the natural complementarity between India's demand and Iran's resources persists. Even when implementation slows, the energy question remains a structural pillar of the relationship.

Cultural agreements have reinforced the softer dimension of bilateral relations. Programmes involving cultural exchange, academic cooperation, Persian studies, tourism, manuscripts, heritage, film, language and people-to-people contact maintain the civilizational foundation of the relationship. These agreements remind both countries that their relationship cannot be measured only in barrels of oil or tonnes of cargo. It is also a relationship of poetry, language, memory and shared historical refinement.

Agreements in science, technology, education and consular cooperation have also been important. Student exchanges, scholarships, academic collaboration, health cooperation, visa facilitation and consular dialogue contribute to the practical management of relations. In a relationship affected by sanctions and regional tensions, such areas provide continuity and human connection. They create social foundations beneath state diplomacy.

However, India–Iran bilateral agreements have faced challenges in implementation. Sanctions have complicated banking, insurance, investment and shipping. Regional instability has affected transport routes. Bureaucratic delays and infrastructure gaps have slowed progress. American pressure has

periodically constrained India's energy imports from Iran. These limitations reveal that agreements alone are not sufficient; they require political will, financial mechanisms, administrative efficiency and favourable external conditions.

Despite these challenges, the accumulation of agreements has created a meaningful bilateral architecture. The relationship now has declarations, joint statements, working groups, consultations, port contracts, cultural programmes and institutional mechanisms. This architecture gives India–Iran relations resilience. It allows cooperation to continue even when one sector faces difficulty. In diplomatic terms, agreements have transformed a historically rich relationship into an increasingly *institutionalized partnership*.

5.3.3 Strategic Consultations

Strategic consultations have become an essential component of India–Iran relations after the Cold War. Unlike ceremonial diplomacy, strategic consultations involve serious discussion of regional security, political developments, connectivity, terrorism, maritime stability, Afghanistan, Central Asia, sanctions, energy and multilateral cooperation. They allow both countries to understand each other's concerns, reduce misperceptions, coordinate where possible and manage differences where necessary. In a volatile region, consultation is itself a strategic asset.

The need for strategic consultation emerged strongly in the 1990s because of Afghanistan. The Taliban's rise created common security concerns. India and Iran needed to exchange assessments about Pakistan's role, extremist networks, Afghan factions, regional stability and possible outcomes. Such consultations strengthened mutual confidence. They did not produce a formal alliance, but they created a habit of strategic conversation. This habit later became important for cooperation on Chabahar and Central Asian access.

Strategic consultations also became necessary because of Iran's relationship with the United States and the sanctions regime. India had to understand Iran's position, while Iran had to understand India's constraints. India's strategic autonomy does not mean ignoring external realities. When Iran faces sanctions, Indian banks, companies, insurers and energy firms are affected. Consultations allow both governments to explore workable mechanisms,

manage expectations and prevent disappointment from becoming distrust. This is a delicate but indispensable part of the relationship.

Foreign Office Consultations have provided an important institutional mechanism. These consultations allow senior officials from both sides to review bilateral issues and exchange views on regional and international developments. They are especially valuable because they create continuity below the summit level. They ensure that the relationship does not depend only on political leaders. Bureaucratic institutions develop memory, expertise and procedural rhythm through such mechanisms.

Security consultations are equally important. India and Iran share concerns about terrorism, narcotics trafficking, extremism, instability in Afghanistan and threats to regional connectivity. Iran's geography near Afghanistan and the Gulf gives it direct exposure to many security challenges that also affect India. India's own experience with terrorism makes it sensitive to extremist networks operating across borders. Strategic consultations provide a platform for comparing assessments and identifying possible areas of cooperation.

Maritime security is another subject of strategic importance. The Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and Arabian Sea are vital to India's energy and trade routes. Iran is a central actor in this maritime environment. India has an interest in freedom of navigation, uninterrupted commerce and de-escalation of Gulf tensions. Iran has an interest in asserting sovereignty and protecting its maritime approaches. Consultations help both sides understand each other's maritime concerns. This is especially important when regional tensions threaten shipping and energy supplies.

Central Asia and the International North–South Transport Corridor also require strategic consultation. Connectivity projects are not merely technical; they involve customs, railways, ports, finance, border management, regional politics and great-power competition. India and Iran need continuous dialogue to align infrastructure plans, resolve operational problems and coordinate with other partners. The INSTC cannot succeed through declarations alone; it requires sustained strategic and administrative consultation.

Multilateral consultations have also gained importance. India and Iran interact in forums such as the United Nations, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS-related mechanisms. Both support a more

multipolar world order, though their methods and priorities differ. Strategic consultations allow them to coordinate where interests converge, such as connectivity, sovereignty, development, counter-terrorism and reform of global governance. They also help manage differences over issues where their partners or alignments diverge.

Strategic consultations are important precisely because India and Iran are not identical in their foreign policies. India has close relations with the United States, Israel, Gulf Arab states, Russia and Europe. Iran has its own relations with Russia, China, regional non-state actors and West Asian partners. These differing networks can create friction. Regular consultation prevents misunderstanding. It allows India to reassure Iran that its relations with other powers are not necessarily anti-Iranian, and it allows Iran to explain its regional concerns without expecting India to adopt Iran's positions completely.

The growth of strategic consultations indicates that India–Iran relations have matured. Mature relationships are not those without differences; they are those with mechanisms to manage differences. India and Iran have learned to maintain dialogue despite sanctions, regional conflict, ideological differences and external pressure. This capacity for dialogue is one of the most valuable achievements of the post-Cold War period.

In conclusion, strategic consultations have converted India–Iran relations from episodic engagement into structured dialogue. They provide the diplomatic machinery through which the two countries discuss Afghanistan, Central Asia, Chabahar, energy, sanctions, terrorism, maritime security and global developments. They are the quiet architecture beneath visible diplomacy. Without them, high-level visits and agreements would remain fragile. With them, the relationship acquires depth, resilience and strategic seriousness.

Concluding Observation

The post-Cold War period gave India–Iran relations a new strategic grammar. Iran became increasingly important in India's extended neighbourhood because it provided access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia, while also remaining central to energy security and Persian Gulf stability. Shared concerns in Afghanistan and Central Asia converted old cultural goodwill into practical geopolitical convergence. The growth of political engagement

through high-level visits, bilateral agreements and strategic consultations created a more institutionalized relationship.

Yet the relationship remained complex. Sanctions, United States–Iran hostility, India’s relations with the United States and Israel, Gulf rivalries, Afghanistan’s instability, Pakistan’s obstruction and infrastructure delays limited the pace of cooperation. Nevertheless, the strategic logic of India–Iran relations remained powerful. Geography repeatedly brought the two countries together; history gave their engagement emotional legitimacy; and regional necessity gave it policy relevance. In the refined language of diplomacy, India–Iran relations after the Cold War became a relationship of *civilizational memory, strategic necessity and geoeconomic possibility*.

Chapter 6:

Geostrategic Importance of Iran for India

Iran occupies a position of profound *geostrategic indispensability* in India's foreign-policy imagination. It is not merely a West Asian state with which India shares historical and cultural relations; it is a pivotal geographical entity that connects the Indian Ocean with the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian region, Russia and the wider Eurasian landmass. In the language of classical geopolitics, Iran is a *corridor state*, a *gateway state*, a *maritime-continent bridge* and a *strategic hinge* between the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and the continental interior of Asia. For India, whose direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is blocked by Pakistan, Iran provides a rare and valuable alternative route to the north-western strategic space.

The geostrategic importance of Iran for India must be understood through the combined logic of *geography*, *connectivity*, *energy*, *security*, *trade*, *regional diplomacy* and *civilizational memory*. India's westward access has historically been constrained by the political geography created after Partition. Pakistan's control over the land routes between India and Afghanistan has limited India's direct access to Central Asia. Iran, through Chabahar Port, road networks, rail possibilities and the International North–South Transport Corridor, provides India with an alternative geopolitical passage. Thus, Iran helps India convert a blocked continental frontier into an open strategic corridor.

From a book-based geopolitical perspective, the importance of Iran can be understood through the classical insights of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* by Alfred Thayer Mahan and *The Geographical Pivot of History* by Halford Mackinder. Mahan emphasized the strategic value of maritime routes, naval access and sea power, while Mackinder emphasized the importance of continental heartlands and land-based power. Iran is significant because it sits at the intersection of these two logics. Through Chabahar, India's maritime power can enter the continental space of Afghanistan and Central Asia. Therefore, Iran allows India to combine *Mahanian maritime access* with *Mackinderian continental reach*.

In contemporary terms, Iran's importance is most visible in India's desire to connect with Central Asia. Central Asia is rich in energy, minerals, strategic location, historical memory and geopolitical possibilities. It is also a region where Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, the United States and other actors have pursued influence. India's engagement with Central Asia cannot become effective without credible connectivity. Iran provides the missing geographical bridge. Chabahar and the INSTC are therefore not ordinary infrastructure projects; they are instruments of *geo-economic statecraft* and *strategic access*.

6.1 Iran as India's Gateway to Central Asia

Iran is India's most realistic gateway to Central Asia because it provides the territorial, maritime and logistical bridge that India lacks through its immediate neighbourhood. Central Asia is geographically close to India in civilizational memory, but distant in political access. The ancient connections between India and Central Asia through Buddhism, trade, Sufism, Persianate culture, silk routes and medieval movements remain historically powerful. Yet modern borders and political hostilities have made that old geography difficult to operationalize. Iran restores, at least partly, India's access to this lost continental space.

The phrase *gateway to Central Asia* must be understood in a precise geopolitical sense. A gateway is not merely a transit route; it is a strategic opening through which a state can project commerce, diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, political influence and cultural engagement. Iran provides such an opening because Indian goods can move by sea to Iranian ports, especially Chabahar, and then proceed by road or rail toward Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics. This route bypasses Pakistan and reduces India's dependence on adversarial transit politics.

Chabahar Port occupies the centre of this gateway concept. Located on Iran's south-eastern coast along the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar opens toward the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Unlike ports deep inside the Persian Gulf, Chabahar gives India relatively direct maritime access to Iran's eastern corridor. From Chabahar, goods can move toward Zahedan, Zaranj, Delaram, Afghanistan and onward Central Asian networks. In this sense, Chabahar is a *strategic aperture* through which India can overcome geographical denial.

Iran's gateway role is also connected with the International North–South Transport Corridor. The INSTC connects India, Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through multimodal sea, road and rail routes. It offers India a route to Eurasia that is potentially shorter, more diversified and less dependent on traditional maritime passages. Through Iran, India can imagine not only access to Central Asia but also to Russia, the Caucasus and parts of Europe. Thus, Iran expands India's geopolitical horizon from South Asia to Eurasia.

The strategic value of Iran as a gateway is magnified by China's expanding presence in Central Asia. China has developed strong economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, pipelines, railways, trade and investment. Pakistan, through its partnership with China, has also attempted to shape regional connectivity in ways that exclude or marginalize India. India's route through Iran is therefore a way of preserving strategic space. It is not merely a response to China or Pakistan, but it certainly prevents India from being trapped in *connectivity exclusion*.

Iran also matters because Central Asian republics themselves seek diversified connectivity. Being landlocked, they require access to multiple corridors, ports and markets. Excessive dependence on one route or one great power reduces their autonomy. India, through Iran, can offer Central Asia another southern access option. This creates mutual benefit: India gains access to Central Asian markets and resources; Central Asian states gain access to India's large market, pharmaceuticals, education, technology, consumer goods and maritime routes; Iran gains transit revenue and geopolitical relevance.

In diplomatic terms, Iran's gateway function transforms India–Iran relations from bilateral friendship into regional partnership. The relationship becomes connected to Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and the Caspian region. This regionalization of India–Iran relations increases their strategic weight. A relationship limited to culture and trade is important; a relationship that reshapes regional access is far more consequential.

Therefore, Iran as India's gateway to Central Asia must be understood as a central pillar of India's extended-neighbourhood policy. It provides India with access, flexibility, strategic autonomy and regional presence. Without Iran, India's Central Asian policy remains aspirational; with Iran, it acquires

geographical substance. In the refined vocabulary of geopolitics, Iran is the *western door of India's Eurasian ambition*.

6.1.1 India's Lack of Direct Land Access to Central Asia

India's lack of direct land access to Central Asia is one of the most serious geographical constraints in Indian foreign policy. Before 1947, the Indian subcontinent had historical routes toward Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia through the north-western frontier. These routes were used by merchants, monks, warriors, scholars, Sufis, travellers and imperial formations over centuries. Partition transformed this civilizational geography into a divided political geography. Pakistan emerged between India and the routes leading to Afghanistan and Central Asia. This created what may be called a *geopolitical discontinuity* in India's westward access.

The land route from India to Afghanistan and Central Asia passes through territory controlled by Pakistan. Because of hostile India–Pakistan relations, Pakistan has generally denied India overland transit to Afghanistan and beyond. This denial has had far-reaching consequences. It has reduced India's direct trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia, limited logistics, increased costs, weakened commercial integration and restricted India's ability to participate in continental connectivity. Geography, in this case, is not merely physical; it is political. India's problem is not distance alone but *politicized distance*.

This lack of direct access has also affected India's strategic depth. Central Asia is important for energy, uranium, minerals, counter-terrorism, connectivity, regional balance and historical-cultural engagement. Yet India cannot reach it easily by land. Air connectivity is useful but insufficient for large-scale trade. Maritime routes through Iran or other corridors become necessary. Therefore, India's Central Asia policy has always faced a gap between aspiration and access. The desire for engagement has existed, but physical connectivity has remained weak.

Pakistan's obstruction has also affected India's Afghanistan policy. Afghanistan is landlocked and has historically depended on Pakistani routes to reach the sea. This dependence has given Pakistan leverage over Afghan trade and politics. India's developmental and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan has often required alternative routes. Chabahar became important precisely because it allowed India to send goods to Afghanistan

without passing through Pakistan. This is why the India-built Zaranj–Delaram road in Afghanistan and the Chabahar route must be seen together as parts of a larger *bypass strategy*.

The lack of access also limits India's trade potential. Central Asian countries import pharmaceuticals, machinery, food products, consumer goods, technology and services—areas where India has strengths. They also export energy, minerals, fertilizers, metals and agricultural products, which are important for India. However, without efficient transit routes, trade remains below potential. Connectivity is not a decorative feature of foreign policy; it is the material foundation of economic diplomacy.

This access problem has become more serious because other powers have built stronger regional connectivity. China has developed pipelines, railways, highways and trade networks linking itself to Central Asia. Russia retains historical infrastructure and security influence. Turkey and Iran also maintain cultural and commercial links. India, despite its goodwill and historical ties, risks marginalization if it cannot overcome the logistics problem. Thus, the lack of direct land access is also a problem of *strategic competitiveness*.

From the standpoint of geography books and political geography, landlocked regions depend heavily on access corridors. Central Asia, being landlocked, requires reliable routes to seaports. India, being separated from Central Asia by Pakistan and Afghanistan, requires transit partners. This creates a natural logic for India–Iran cooperation. Iran has access to the sea and land connections toward Central Asia; India has maritime capacity and a large market. Their partnership addresses a structural geographical deficit.

India's lack of direct land access also affects its diplomatic psychology. A country that cannot physically reach a region struggles to sustain influence there. Diplomatic visits and cultural memory are not enough. Real influence requires movement of goods, people, capital, technology and strategic assistance. Therefore, India's policy toward Iran is partly a policy of overcoming geographical limitation. Iran offers India a way to re-enter a historical space from which modern political geography has excluded it.

In conclusion, India's lack of direct land access to Central Asia is a fundamental challenge of post-Partition geopolitics. It restricts trade, connectivity, strategic outreach and regional influence. Iran's importance arises precisely because it provides an alternative to this constraint. Through

Iran, India can transform *geographical blockage* into *strategic mobility*. This is one of the strongest reasons why Iran occupies such a crucial place in India's foreign policy.

6.1.2 Iran as an Alternative Route

Iran functions as India's most important alternative route to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia. This route is alternative not only in the logistical sense but also in the strategic sense. It offers India a way to bypass Pakistan, diversify connectivity, reduce vulnerability and establish an independent westward corridor. In the vocabulary of geopolitics, Iran provides India with *route autonomy*. This autonomy is vital because no rising power can afford to have its continental access controlled by an adversarial neighbour.

The most important component of this alternative route is Chabahar Port. Chabahar gives India maritime access to Iran's south-eastern coast and provides onward connectivity toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. From Indian ports such as Mumbai, Kandla or Mundra, cargo can move by sea to Chabahar and then by land toward Afghanistan. This route reduces dependence on Pakistani ports and transit systems. For Afghanistan, it provides access to the sea beyond Pakistan. For India, it provides a western corridor into the continental interior. For Iran, it strengthens its role as a transit state.

Chabahar's significance increases because of its location outside the narrowest interior of the Persian Gulf. It faces the Gulf of Oman and opens toward the Arabian Sea. This gives it logistical value for India's maritime access. Chabahar is not simply an Iranian port; it is a *geostrategic interface* between the Indian Ocean and Eurasian land routes. Its development helps India connect maritime capabilities with continental objectives.

Iran as an alternative route also includes road and rail networks. The Chabahar–Zahedan route, the connection toward Zaranj in Afghanistan, and Iran's broader rail links toward Mashhad, Turkmenistan and the Caspian region all form part of a wider strategic geography. The full realization of this route depends on infrastructure, financing, sanctions management, security and political will. Nevertheless, the route has already acquired immense symbolic and practical importance in Indian strategy.

The International North–South Transport Corridor further strengthens Iran's alternative-route role. The INSTC connects India to Iran and then toward the

Caspian Sea, Russia and Europe. It offers a multimodal corridor that can reduce dependence on traditional maritime routes and create new trade possibilities. For India, the INSTC is important not only for commerce but also for geopolitical diversification. It prevents India's Eurasian access from being dependent exclusively on routes influenced by China, Pakistan or unstable maritime chokepoints.

Iran's alternative route also has a humanitarian dimension. India has used the Chabahar route for assistance to Afghanistan, including food and other supplies. Humanitarian access matters because Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan-controlled transit can become politically vulnerable. Chabahar gives India and Afghanistan a route less exposed to Pakistan's leverage. This enhances Afghanistan's economic sovereignty and India's role as a reliable development partner.

The alternative route through Iran also supports India's relations with Central Asian republics. These countries have repeatedly shown interest in Chabahar and INSTC-related connectivity because they also seek multiple routes to global markets. For landlocked Central Asian states, diversification of corridors is a form of strategic independence. India's engagement through Iran can therefore align with Central Asia's own desire for *multi-vector connectivity*.

Iran's route also has strategic implications for India's competition with China. China's Belt and Road Initiative has created extensive connectivity networks across Eurasia, including routes through Pakistan and Central Asia. India has refused to endorse projects that violate its sovereignty concerns, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passing through territory claimed by India. In this setting, Chabahar and the Iran route offer India a sovereign and independent connectivity option. This strengthens India's bargaining position and prevents strategic isolation.

However, Iran as an alternative route is not free from challenges. Sanctions on Iran complicate banking, insurance, investment and logistics. Afghanistan's instability creates uncertainty. Infrastructure gaps delay implementation. Regional conflicts involving Iran can affect investor confidence and maritime risk. India's relations with the United States also require careful management when engaging Iran. Thus, the route is strategically valuable but operationally difficult. It demands *patient diplomacy* and *institutional perseverance*.

Despite these difficulties, the route's importance remains undeniable. In geopolitics, even a difficult corridor may be indispensable if it addresses a structural constraint. Iran does precisely that for India. It gives India an alternative to Pakistan-controlled access, expands India's strategic space, and connects India's maritime economy with Central Asia and Eurasia. Therefore, Iran's role as an alternative route is one of the strongest pillars of India–Iran relations.

6.1.3 Importance of Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics

Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics are central to the geostrategic importance of Iran for India. Afghanistan is the immediate land bridge, while Central Asia is the wider strategic destination. Without Afghanistan, India's route through Iran loses part of its continental depth; without Central Asia, the route loses much of its long-term economic and geopolitical value. Iran becomes important because it connects India to both. In this triangular geography—India, Iran and Afghanistan/Central Asia—the logic of regional strategy becomes clear.

Afghanistan is important to India because it affects security, connectivity, terrorism, regional balance and historical memory. A stable Afghanistan can become a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia; an unstable Afghanistan becomes a source of terrorism, narcotics, refugee flows and geopolitical rivalry. India has invested heavily in Afghanistan's development through infrastructure, education, health, capacity building and humanitarian assistance. Yet India's ability to sustain such engagement depends on access. Iran provides that access through Chabahar and onward routes.

Afghanistan is also important because it represents the central space where India and Pakistan's strategic visions have often collided. Pakistan has historically sought influence in Afghanistan as part of its concept of strategic depth. India prefers a sovereign, plural and independent Afghanistan that is not used as a base for anti-India terrorism. Iran also has strong interests in Afghanistan because of its border, refugee concerns, water disputes, Shia communities, trade and security. Therefore, India and Iran often find common ground in supporting Afghan stability and opposing extremist domination.

Central Asian republics are important for India because they possess energy resources, minerals, uranium, strategic location and historical-cultural connections. Kazakhstan is important for energy and uranium; Uzbekistan

has demographic, historical and strategic weight; Turkmenistan is rich in natural gas; Tajikistan has security relevance and cultural links; Kyrgyzstan occupies an important position in Central Asian geopolitics. These republics are part of the Eurasian heartland, and India's engagement with them strengthens its identity as a wider Asian power.

Central Asia is also important for India's energy security. The region contains hydrocarbons, uranium and other strategic resources. India has long been interested in energy projects involving Central Asia, including gas pipeline ideas and resource partnerships. However, lack of connectivity has limited implementation. Iran can help bridge this gap by providing access routes and linking India with Central Asian markets. Thus, Iran's role is not merely geographical but energy-strategic.

The Central Asian republics also seek diversified partners. They do not wish to depend exclusively on Russia or China. India offers them pharmaceuticals, education, information technology, medical services, agriculture, capacity building, defence training and a large market. However, without connectivity, India's role remains constrained. Iran helps convert goodwill into practical engagement. Through Chabahar and INSTC, India can present itself as a more credible economic and strategic partner to Central Asia.

Afghanistan and Central Asia also matter for counter-terrorism. Extremist networks, narcotics trafficking and radical ideologies can move across porous borders. India and Iran both have concerns about such threats. Stability in Afghanistan is crucial for preventing the spread of extremism into Central Asia and South Asia. Iran's border with Afghanistan gives it direct exposure to these challenges; India's experience with terrorism gives it strong interest in regional security. Their concerns overlap naturally.

The importance of Afghanistan and Central Asia also lies in connectivity competition. Multiple corridors now compete across Eurasia: Chinese corridors, Russian routes, the Middle Corridor, routes through Iran, and maritime alternatives. India cannot remain absent from this connectivity map. If India does not participate in Eurasian connectivity, it risks strategic marginalization. Iran provides the pathway through which India can enter this competition without compromising sovereignty. Therefore, Afghanistan and Central Asia are not peripheral theatres; they are part of India's grand strategic outreach.

Culturally, Afghanistan and Central Asia also connect India and Iran. Persianate culture, Sufi traditions, Buddhism, trade routes, manuscripts, architecture and medieval political histories have linked these regions for centuries. Cities such as Balkh, Herat, Bukhara, Samarkand and Merv were historically connected with Persianate and Indian worlds. This civilizational memory gives contemporary connectivity a deeper meaning. India's engagement with Central Asia through Iran is therefore not an artificial project; it is a revival of older Asian linkages under modern geopolitical conditions.

Afghanistan's recent efforts to diversify trade routes through Iran and Central Asia show the continuing relevance of this geography. When Pakistan routes become unreliable, alternative corridors through Iran gain importance. This confirms the basic logic of India's Chabahar policy: access routes must be diversified because political dependency on one corridor creates vulnerability. Iran helps reduce that vulnerability for India, Afghanistan and Central Asia alike.

In conclusion, Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics are indispensable to understanding Iran's geostrategic importance for India. Afghanistan is the immediate corridor of access and security; Central Asia is the wider destination of energy, trade and geopolitical engagement. Iran connects India to both. It transforms India's westward policy from aspiration into operational possibility. In the diplomatic language of the twenty-first century, Iran is the *strategic bridge through which India seeks to reconnect with the Eurasian heartland*.

Concluding Observation

The geostrategic importance of Iran for India lies in Iran's capacity to overcome India's greatest western geographical limitation: lack of direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Pakistan's denial of transit has created a structural constraint in India's continental policy. Iran offers the alternative. Through Chabahar, INSTC, road and rail networks, and regional coordination, Iran enables India to access Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Eurasia. This makes Iran indispensable to India's extended-neighbourhood strategy.

Iran's importance is not merely logistical. It is strategic, economic, cultural and geopolitical. It allows India to diversify connectivity, strengthen energy

security, support Afghan stability, engage Central Asian republics, counter connectivity exclusion, and participate in Eurasian geopolitics. The relationship therefore represents a convergence of *geographical necessity*, *historical memory* and *strategic foresight*. In the larger architecture of Indian foreign policy, Iran is not a peripheral partner; it is a *gateway to continental Asia* and a decisive pillar of India's westward geostrategic imagination.

6.2 Iran's Location in West Asia

Iran's location in West Asia is one of the most consequential geographical facts in Asian geopolitics. It is not merely a country placed on the map between South Asia and the Arab world; it is a *strategic plateau-state*, a *maritime-continent interface*, and a *civilizational bridge* connecting the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Caspian region, Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan and the wider Indian Ocean. Its geography gives it an exceptional degree of regional relevance because it touches several strategic theatres at once. To the north, Iran looks toward the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and Central Asia; to the east, it borders Afghanistan and Pakistan; to the west, it faces Iraq and Turkey; and to the south, it opens to the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Thus, Iran is not a marginal state of West Asia; it is one of the region's principal *geopolitical pivots*.

For India, Iran's location in West Asia is of extraordinary importance because India's economic security, energy supply, maritime trade and continental outreach are deeply connected with this region. India's westward foreign policy cannot be complete without Iran because Iran stands at the meeting point of India's three major interests: *energy security*, *connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia*, and *maritime stability in the western Indian Ocean*. The Persian Gulf supplies a major share of global energy; the Gulf of Oman provides access to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean; and the Strait of Hormuz functions as one of the world's most sensitive maritime chokepoints. Iran's physical proximity to all three gives it a central place in India's strategic calculation.

From the perspective of classical geopolitical thought, Iran's location possesses both *Mahanian* and *Mackinderian* significance. Alfred Thayer Mahan, in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, emphasized the importance of sea lanes, naval mobility, maritime commerce and control of strategic waters. Halford Mackinder, in *The Geographical Pivot of History*,

emphasized the power of continental landmasses and interior routes. Iran is important because it stands between these two strategic logics. It is connected to the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, but it also opens toward Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Eurasian interior. Therefore, Iran enables a maritime power like India to enter the continental theatre through sea-connected land routes.

Iran's West Asian location also gives it diplomatic and security leverage. A country situated near the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz inevitably influences energy markets, naval deployments, shipping insurance, regional crisis management and global oil-price psychology. Any instability involving Iran immediately affects not only West Asia but also Asia's major energy-importing economies, including India, China, Japan and South Korea. For this reason, India cannot treat Iran only as a bilateral partner; it must view Iran as a *systemic actor* in the energy and maritime architecture of Asia.

Iran's location is also significant because it provides India with an alternative to Pakistan-controlled geography. India's direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is blocked by Pakistan, but Iran's southern coastline and eastern land corridors provide another route. Chabahar Port, located on Iran's Gulf of Oman coast, is therefore central to India's geostrategic thinking. It allows India to connect the Arabian Sea with Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. In this sense, Iran's location in West Asia is not merely a matter of maps; it is a matter of India's *strategic mobility*.

The West Asian location of Iran further allows India to practise *multi-vector diplomacy*. India maintains important relations with Arab Gulf states, Israel, Iran, Iraq, Turkey and other regional actors. Iran's position requires India to balance carefully among competing regional powers without becoming captive to any one rivalry. This diplomatic balancing is one of the most sophisticated features of India's West Asia policy. Iran's location makes it unavoidable; Iran's politics make engagement delicate; and Iran's history makes the relationship civilizationally meaningful.

Thus, Iran's location in West Asia must be understood as a convergence of *geography, energy, maritime access, regional security, civilizational depth and connectivity*. Its geography gives it weight; its coastline gives it access; its proximity to Hormuz gives it leverage; its corridor potential gives it value for India; and its historical relationship with India gives the partnership

emotional legitimacy. In the refined language of geopolitics, Iran is the *western hinge of India's extended-neighbourhood strategy*.

6.2.1 Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf is one of the most strategically important maritime spaces in the world, and Iran's long northern and north-eastern frontage on this gulf gives it immense geopolitical significance. The Persian Gulf is a shallow marginal sea of the Indian Ocean lying between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Although geographically compact, it possesses global importance because it contains some of the world's most concentrated oil and gas reserves and serves as a major artery of energy exports. For India, the Persian Gulf is not a distant water body; it is an energy lifeline, a diaspora zone, a trade corridor and a security-sensitive maritime environment.

Iran's position on the Persian Gulf gives it a decisive role in Gulf geopolitics. Its coastline extends along the northern side of the gulf, facing Arab Gulf monarchies across narrow waters. This geography makes Iran both a neighbour and a rival to many Gulf Arab states. It also gives Iran proximity to major oil fields, offshore installations, islands, shipping routes and naval theatres. Iran's ports, islands and coastal facilities allow it to influence the security environment of the Gulf. Therefore, any discussion of Persian Gulf security is incomplete without Iran.

For India, the Persian Gulf is central to energy security. India's economic growth, industrial expansion, transport networks and urban development depend heavily on imported hydrocarbons. The Gulf region has historically supplied a major share of India's crude oil and liquefied natural gas. Even when India diversifies energy sources, the Gulf remains indispensable because of proximity, scale, reliability and established commercial networks. Iran's location on the Persian Gulf means that India must maintain serious diplomatic engagement with Tehran to understand and manage Gulf energy risks.

The Persian Gulf also matters because of the Indian diaspora. Millions of Indians live and work in the Gulf region, especially in the Arab Gulf countries. Their remittances, labour, skills and social presence form a crucial dimension of India's external relations. Any military tension in the Gulf can

endanger Indian nationals, disrupt livelihoods and create evacuation challenges. Iran's role in Gulf security therefore affects India's consular and humanitarian interests. India's diplomacy toward Iran must consequently consider not only oil and strategy but also the safety of Indian citizens across the Gulf region.

The Persian Gulf is also a theatre of naval and maritime strategy. Sea lanes passing through the Gulf and then through the Strait of Hormuz carry energy and commercial cargo to Asia, Europe and other regions. Naval forces from regional and extra-regional powers operate in or near this maritime space. The United States, European states, Gulf countries and Iran all possess interests in Gulf security. India, as a major Indian Ocean power, has a strong interest in freedom of navigation, safe passage of tankers, maritime de-escalation and protection of commercial shipping. Iran's Gulf location makes it central to these concerns.

From a diplomatic perspective, the Persian Gulf compels India to follow a policy of *equilibrium without entanglement*. India has strong partnerships with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Iraq. It also has civilizational and strategic ties with Iran. These relationships do not always sit comfortably together because Iran has rivalries with several Gulf Arab states. India cannot afford to choose one side permanently because its interests are distributed across the region. Therefore, India's Gulf policy requires diplomatic tact, strategic patience and careful language.

The Persian Gulf also carries historical significance for India–Iran relations. Long before the modern energy age, Indian merchants, sailors and communities were active across Persian Gulf ports. Trade between western India and the Gulf involved textiles, spices, pearls, horses, dates, metals and other goods. The Gulf was a maritime bridge between India, Iran, Arabia and East Africa. This older commercial memory gives contemporary India–Iran engagement a deeper historical foundation. The modern oil tanker has replaced the old merchant dhow, but the sea continues to connect the two regions.

Iran's Persian Gulf location is also connected with its sense of national identity and strategic pride. Iran sees itself as a major Gulf power with legitimate interests in regional security. It resists arrangements that exclude it from Gulf security architecture. At the same time, Gulf Arab states often view

Iran with suspicion because of revolutionary ideology, military capabilities and regional activism. This mutual distrust has made the Persian Gulf a theatre of recurring tension. India, seeking stability, must engage Iran as a necessary actor rather than ignore it.

The Persian Gulf's importance becomes even greater when viewed through the lens of global economic vulnerability. Because such a large share of oil and gas supplies moves from this region, any crisis can affect prices, inflation, shipping costs, insurance premiums and industrial production across the world. India, as a developing and energy-importing economy, is particularly sensitive to such disruptions. Iran's presence along the Persian Gulf gives it a role in a maritime system that directly affects Indian economic security.

Therefore, the Persian Gulf is central to understanding Iran's geostrategic importance for India. It is a source of energy, a maritime corridor, a diaspora environment, a naval theatre, a historical trade space and a diplomatic balancing arena. Iran's position on this gulf gives it strategic weight that India cannot ignore. In the language of Indian foreign policy, the Persian Gulf is not merely a water body west of India; it is an *economic artery* and Iran is one of its most important guardians, challengers and stakeholders.

6.2.2 Gulf of Oman

The Gulf of Oman is of special importance in India–Iran relations because it forms the maritime passage between the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz. Unlike the Persian Gulf, which is enclosed and strategically congested, the Gulf of Oman opens more directly toward the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Iran's coastline on the Gulf of Oman gives it an outward-facing maritime orientation that is particularly relevant for India. It is here that Chabahar Port acquires its geostrategic meaning. Chabahar is not only an Iranian port; it is the *Indian Ocean-facing gateway* of India–Iran connectivity.

The Gulf of Oman lies between Iran to the north and Oman to the south and connects the Arabian Sea with the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. For India, this geography is extremely important because it links Indian maritime routes with Iran's continental corridors. Indian cargo can move across the Arabian Sea to Chabahar without entering the innermost Persian Gulf. From there, goods can proceed toward Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond. This makes the Gulf of Oman a *strategic vestibule* between India's maritime economy and Eurasia's land routes.

Chabahar Port is the central instrument of India's engagement with Iran's Gulf of Oman coast. Located in south-eastern Iran, Chabahar provides India with a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that bypasses Pakistan. Its importance is not limited to bilateral trade. It is a regional connectivity project, a humanitarian corridor, a commercial platform and a geostrategic alternative. Through Chabahar, India can support Afghan trade, deliver assistance, strengthen ties with Central Asian republics and reduce its dependence on Pakistan-controlled transit. Thus, the Gulf of Oman transforms Iran from a Gulf energy actor into a connectivity partner for India.

The Gulf of Oman is also significant because it links with the broader western Indian Ocean. India's maritime strategy increasingly recognizes the importance of the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Red Sea and East African coast. These waters carry energy, goods, naval movements and strategic influence. India's naval interests include freedom of navigation, anti-piracy operations, maritime domain awareness, protection of sea lanes and crisis response. Iran's Gulf of Oman coast is part of this maritime environment. Therefore, India-Iran relations have an implicit maritime-security dimension even when they are discussed mainly in terms of ports and trade.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the Gulf of Oman gives Iran a valuable alternative to the congested Persian Gulf. Ports such as Chabahar allow Iran to develop its less-developed south-eastern region and reduce overdependence on Persian Gulf ports. For Iran, Chabahar supports regional development, transit revenue and strategic depth. For India, it provides access. For Afghanistan and Central Asia, it offers an outlet to the sea. Thus, the Gulf of Oman is a space where Indian, Iranian, Afghan and Central Asian interests can intersect productively.

The Gulf of Oman also has strategic relevance because it is near but not identical to the Strait of Hormuz. In times of tension, traffic through Hormuz becomes vulnerable to military and political pressure. Chabahar's location east of the Strait gives it an advantage as an access point from the Indian Ocean. Although it cannot fully eliminate the risks of regional conflict, it gives India and Iran a relatively more open maritime platform. This is why Chabahar is often described as a project of *strategic resilience*.

The Gulf of Oman also connects India-Iran relations with Oman, the United Arab Emirates and other maritime actors. Oman, in particular, occupies an

important position on the southern side of the Gulf of Oman and the Musandam Peninsula near the Strait of Hormuz. India has historically maintained warm ties with Oman. This creates a wider maritime triangle involving India, Iran and Oman. Stability in the Gulf of Oman is therefore important not only for India–Iran cooperation but also for India’s larger western maritime diplomacy.

The Gulf of Oman has historically been part of the maritime world linking India, Iran, Arabia and East Africa. Indian traders and sailors were familiar with these waters for centuries. Modern strategic projects such as Chabahar revive this older maritime geography under contemporary conditions. This illustrates an important truth: modern geopolitics often reactivates ancient routes. The Gulf of Oman was once a commercial passage; today it is also a geopolitical corridor.

For India, the Gulf of Oman represents access without dependence. It allows India to reach Iran directly by sea, avoiding Pakistani land routes. It allows India to build commercial and humanitarian connectivity with Afghanistan. It supports the larger International North–South Transport Corridor. It gives India a platform in the western Indian Ocean. Therefore, it is one of the most important maritime spaces in India’s extended-neighbourhood strategy.

In conclusion, Iran’s location on the Gulf of Oman greatly enhances its geostrategic value for India. The Gulf of Oman is the maritime doorway to Chabahar, the route to Afghanistan, the bridge to Central Asia and the western extension of India’s Indian Ocean strategy. It is the space where *sea power*, *connectivity*, *commerce* and *continental ambition* converge. In India’s strategic imagination, the Gulf of Oman is the water through which India reaches Iran’s land, and through Iran’s land, the wider Eurasian heartland.

6.2.3 Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the most important maritime chokepoints in the world and perhaps the most sensitive energy passage in West Asia. It connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Its strategic importance lies in the fact that it is the principal outlet through which oil and liquefied natural gas from the Persian Gulf reach global markets. For India, China, Japan, South Korea and other Asian energy-importing economies, the Strait of Hormuz is not a distant geographic feature; it is a vital artery of national economic security. Any disturbance in the strait

immediately creates anxiety in oil markets, shipping companies, insurance systems and governments.

Iran's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz gives it enormous geopolitical leverage. The northern coast of the strait lies near Iran, and Iranian ports, islands and naval facilities are located in this strategic zone. The southern side is associated with Oman's Musandam Peninsula and nearby Gulf Arab states. The strait's geography therefore gives Iran a direct role in the security calculations of the Persian Gulf. Even without closing the strait, Iran's ability to influence risk perceptions can affect global energy prices. In geopolitics, perceived vulnerability can be almost as powerful as actual disruption.

The Strait of Hormuz is best understood as a *maritime chokepoint*. A chokepoint is a narrow passage through which large volumes of strategic goods must pass. When such a passage is threatened, the effect is global. The Strait of Hormuz is particularly important because many oil-exporting states—such as Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates—depend heavily on routes through or near it. Although some alternative pipelines and routes exist, they cannot fully replace the volume and strategic centrality of Hormuz. Therefore, the strait remains a point of *systemic vulnerability* in the world economy.

For India, the Strait of Hormuz is crucial because India's energy security is deeply connected with Persian Gulf supplies. A disruption in Hormuz can increase crude oil prices, raise transport and insurance costs, affect inflation, weaken the balance of payments and disturb industrial planning. India's economy, despite growing renewable energy ambitions, remains heavily dependent on imported hydrocarbons. Therefore, the stability of Hormuz is not merely a foreign-policy concern; it is a domestic economic concern. The price of petrol, diesel, fertilizer, transport and industrial inputs can be indirectly affected by events in this narrow waterway.

The Strait of Hormuz also has maritime-security implications for India. India's navy and diplomatic establishment have long recognized the importance of sea-lane security in the Indian Ocean and its adjoining waters. The western Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf form an interconnected maritime theatre. The safe movement of tankers and merchant vessels through Hormuz is essential for uninterrupted trade. India does not seek militarized confrontation in the strait, but it has a strong interest

in freedom of navigation and de-escalation. Therefore, India's engagement with Iran must include sensitivity to Hormuz-related security dynamics.

The strait has repeatedly demonstrated its vulnerability during regional crises. During the Iran–Iraq War, the *Tanker War* phase showed how energy shipping could become a target. Later tensions involving Iran, the United States, Gulf states and other actors repeatedly raised fears about possible disruption. Even rumours or threats concerning Hormuz can move oil prices because global markets understand the strait's strategic importance. This makes Hormuz a *psychological chokepoint* as well as a physical one.

Iran's attitude toward Hormuz is shaped by both sovereignty and deterrence. Tehran considers itself a legitimate Gulf power with security interests in the strait. It also sees Western naval presence near its waters as a challenge. Iran has at times used its proximity to Hormuz as a form of strategic signalling, especially during periods of confrontation with the United States or regional rivals. For India, this creates a delicate diplomatic situation. India values relations with Iran but also requires secure passage through the strait. It therefore prefers dialogue, restraint and regional de-escalation.

The Strait of Hormuz also connects India's Iran policy with its relations with Arab Gulf states. India imports energy from several Gulf countries and hosts a large Indian diaspora across the region. If Hormuz becomes unstable, India's interests in multiple countries are affected simultaneously. Therefore, India cannot treat Hormuz only as an Iran-related issue. It is a regional issue involving Iran, Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, the United States and global energy consumers. India's policy must therefore remain balanced and non-provocative.

The strategic importance of Hormuz also strengthens the case for energy diversification. India must diversify suppliers, increase strategic petroleum reserves, develop renewable energy, expand LNG infrastructure, and maintain multiple diplomatic relationships. However, diversification cannot eliminate Hormuz's importance in the short and medium term. The sheer scale of energy movement through the strait makes it irreplaceable. Thus, India's best policy is not to imagine a world without Hormuz but to reduce vulnerability while preserving relations with all relevant actors, including Iran.

From a book-based geopolitical perspective, the Strait of Hormuz represents the classic relationship between geography and power. Nicholas Spykman's emphasis in *The Geography of the Peace* on rimland regions and maritime-continent interfaces is especially relevant here. Hormuz is a rimland chokepoint where continental energy resources meet maritime distribution networks. It is also a space where regional sovereignty and global dependence intersect. The country nearest to such a chokepoint inevitably acquires strategic importance. Iran's relevance to India must therefore be read through this geography.

The Strait of Hormuz also explains why India must engage Iran despite international pressure or regional complications. A country situated near such a vital passage cannot be diplomatically ignored. Even when India faces constraints due to sanctions, U.S.–Iran tensions or Gulf rivalries, it must preserve communication with Tehran. Diplomatic channels reduce risk, clarify intentions and protect interests. Engagement is not a favour to Iran; it is a necessity for India's own energy and maritime security.

In conclusion, the Strait of Hormuz is the most sensitive maritime element in Iran's geostrategic importance for India. It is the gateway between the Persian Gulf and the wider Indian Ocean, the route of immense energy flows, and a potential flashpoint in regional crises. Iran's proximity to Hormuz gives it leverage; India's dependence on Gulf energy gives India vulnerability; and the global economy's reliance on this passage gives the strait systemic importance. Therefore, in India's foreign-policy calculus, Hormuz is not merely a narrow stretch of water; it is a *maritime fulcrum of energy security*, and Iran is one of its most consequential geopolitical actors.

Concluding Observation

Iran's location in West Asia gives it an exceptional place in India's strategic imagination. The Persian Gulf makes Iran central to energy politics; the Gulf of Oman makes Iran central to India's connectivity strategy through Chabahar; and the Strait of Hormuz makes Iran central to the security of global oil and gas flows. These three maritime spaces together transform Iran into a *geostrategic node* of the highest importance. For India, Iran is therefore not only a civilizational neighbour or a trade partner; it is a maritime-continent bridge connecting India's energy security, western Indian Ocean strategy, Afghanistan policy, Central Asian outreach and Eurasian ambition.

The Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz together create what may be called Iran's *southern strategic triangle*. This triangle gives Iran access, leverage and regional weight. For India, engagement with this triangle is essential for maintaining energy resilience, maritime stability, regional balance and strategic autonomy. In the refined vocabulary of foreign policy, Iran's West Asian location converts geography into diplomacy, sea lanes into security, and ports into instruments of national strategy.

6.3 Iran in India's Continental Strategy

Iran occupies a decisive place in India's *continental strategy* because it offers India a route into the Eurasian landmass beyond the limitations imposed by South Asian political geography. Continental strategy refers to a country's policy for engaging land-based regions, overland trade routes, inland markets, borderland security zones, resource-rich territories and geopolitical corridors. For India, the continental dimension has always been complicated by Pakistan's denial of land transit, Afghanistan's instability and China's growing presence in Eurasia. In this context, Iran emerges as a *strategic land bridge*, enabling India to connect its maritime strength with the continental spaces of Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe.

India's continental strategy cannot rely only on aspiration; it requires corridors, ports, roads, railways, customs systems, logistics chains and stable diplomatic partnerships. Iran provides the geographical possibility for all these elements. Through Chabahar Port, the Chabahar–Zahedan axis, Afghan routes, and the International North–South Transport Corridor, Iran becomes the *operational geography* of India's westward continental outreach. In geopolitical language, Iran converts India's *continental desire* into *corridor-based access*.

Classical geopolitical thinkers help illuminate this importance. *Halford Mackinder's The Geographical Pivot of History* emphasized the strategic weight of continental interiors, while *Nicholas Spykman's The Geography of the Peace* stressed the significance of rimlands where land and sea power interact. Iran lies precisely in such a zone. It is neither purely continental nor purely maritime. It is a rimland state through which India can move from the Arabian Sea into the Eurasian interior. Thus, Iran enables India to operate at the intersection of *sea power* and *land power*.

Iran is also essential because India's continental ambitions have been historically interrupted. Before Partition, the north-western routes of the subcontinent linked India to Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia. After Partition, those routes became politically blocked. India's continental strategy therefore requires an alternative that does not depend upon Pakistan's consent. Iran offers this alternative. It allows India to re-enter the historical geography of Central Asia through a modern diplomatic and infrastructural route.

In strategic terms, Iran helps India avoid *continental marginalization*. If India cannot reach Afghanistan and Central Asia effectively, it risks being confined to the subcontinental and maritime sphere while China, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan shape the continental spaces to its west and north-west. Iran provides India with a way to participate in Eurasian connectivity, energy diplomacy and regional security dialogue. Therefore, Iran is not merely a partner in West Asia; it is a *continental enabler* of India's wider Asian role.

6.3.1 Bypassing Pakistan

The importance of Iran in India's continental strategy begins with the necessity of *bypassing Pakistan*. This phrase should not be understood narrowly as hostility alone; it is a structural geopolitical necessity created by Pakistan's repeated refusal to allow India normal overland transit to Afghanistan and Central Asia. India's geography after Partition became discontinuous toward the west. Pakistan occupies the land corridor between India and Afghanistan, and India's access to the wider Eurasian landmass is therefore subject to the political will of an adversarial state. In such a situation, alternative routes become instruments of *strategic autonomy*.

Pakistan's denial of transit has affected Indian trade, humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and regional influence. Afghanistan is geographically close to India in historical and cultural terms, yet physically difficult to reach because of the Pakistan barrier. Central Asia is similarly connected to India through history, Sufism, Buddhism, Persianate culture and trade memory, but modern logistics remain weak. Iran provides India with a route that reduces this vulnerability. Through sea access to Chabahar and land routes onward to Afghanistan, India can avoid dependence on Pakistani territory.

Chabahar Port is central to this bypass strategy. It allows Indian goods to move by sea to Iran and from there by land toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. This route gives India an independent logistical channel. It is particularly important for humanitarian supplies, commercial cargo, development assistance and future regional trade. A country that controls its own access controls its own strategic options. Therefore, Chabahar is not merely a commercial port; it is a *geopolitical instrument of access emancipation*.

Bypassing Pakistan also strengthens Afghanistan's economic sovereignty. Landlocked Afghanistan has historically depended heavily on Pakistani routes to reach the sea. Such dependence gives Pakistan leverage over Afghan trade and politics. Chabahar offers Afghanistan an alternative maritime outlet through Iran. This helps reduce Kabul's vulnerability to transit pressure and creates space for more diversified foreign relations. India's use of Chabahar therefore serves not only Indian interests but also Afghanistan's search for route diversification.

Iran's role in bypassing Pakistan has another dimension: it prevents India from being strategically excluded by China–Pakistan connectivity projects. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwadar Port have strengthened Sino-Pakistani infrastructure presence in the region. India's Chabahar engagement offers a different route, based on Indian partnership with Iran and potential linkages with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Chabahar and Gwadar should not be reduced to a simplistic rivalry, but they do represent two competing connectivity imaginations. Chabahar gives India its own *westward access architecture*.

This bypass strategy also has diplomatic value. It tells regional states that India is willing to invest in connectivity despite obstruction. It demonstrates that India's continental outreach is not hostage to Pakistan. It also shows Central Asian republics and Afghanistan that India can be a serious partner with practical routes, not only cultural goodwill. Diplomacy becomes credible when supported by logistics.

However, bypassing Pakistan through Iran is not without difficulties. Sanctions on Iran complicate banking, insurance and investment. Afghanistan's political instability affects route reliability. Infrastructure gaps require sustained financing. Regional tensions involving Iran can create uncertainty. Yet these challenges do not reduce the strategic importance of the

route. In geopolitics, an alternative corridor may be difficult, but if it solves a structural constraint, it remains indispensable.

Thus, Iran's role in bypassing Pakistan is central to India's continental strategy. It gives India a sovereign route, reduces dependence on adversarial transit, strengthens Afghan connectivity, and opens possibilities toward Central Asia. In the refined language of strategy, Iran provides India with *geographical liberation from subcontinental blockage*.

6.3.2 Access to Eurasia

Iran is India's natural corridor to *Eurasia*, a vast geopolitical space that includes Central Asia, the Caspian region, Russia, the Caucasus and parts of Europe. Eurasia is rich in energy, minerals, trade routes, civilizational memory and strategic competition. India's rise as a major power requires sustained engagement with this space. Yet India's access to Eurasia is limited by Pakistan's obstruction and by China's expanding land-based influence. Iran helps India overcome this limitation by offering a route from the Arabian Sea into the Eurasian interior.

The International North–South Transport Corridor represents the most important institutional expression of India's Eurasian access through Iran. The INSTC is a multimodal network connecting India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through sea, road and rail. Its strategic value lies in route diversification. It allows India to imagine a northward economic pathway that is not dependent on the Suez route alone and not dependent on Pakistan-controlled land corridors. Iran is the central territorial pillar of this corridor.

Access to Eurasia through Iran also has economic significance. India can export pharmaceuticals, textiles, engineering goods, agricultural products, information-technology services and consumer goods to Central Asia and beyond. It can import energy, fertilizers, minerals, metals and strategic resources. However, trade requires physical routes. Diplomatic goodwill without connectivity cannot produce large-scale commerce. Iran supplies the geographical bridge through which Indian trade can enter Eurasian markets more effectively.

Eurasian access is also important for India's energy strategy. Central Asia and the Caspian region contain oil, gas, uranium and other valuable resources. India's energy security requires diversification, and Eurasia offers

possibilities beyond the Gulf and maritime suppliers. Pipeline projects have often faced political obstacles, but transport corridors, energy investments and resource partnerships remain strategically relevant. Iran's location allows India to participate in this energy geography.

Iran also connects India to Russia through alternative routes. India–Russia relations remain important in defence, energy, space, nuclear cooperation and multilateral diplomacy. Traditional maritime routes are long, and the changing geopolitical environment has made alternative connectivity valuable. Through Iran and the Caspian region, India can strengthen physical connectivity with Russia. This gives Iran a role in sustaining India's older strategic partnership with Moscow in a new geoeconomic form.

Access to Eurasia through Iran also enhances India's position in a competitive strategic environment. China's Belt and Road Initiative has created extensive routes across Eurasia. Russia has historical influence. Turkey seeks cultural and political presence. Iran seeks transit relevance. Central Asian states pursue multi-vector diplomacy. India must participate in this networked geography or risk marginalization. Iran gives India a practical entry point.

This Eurasian access also contains a civilizational dimension. India's historical links with Eurasia passed through Buddhist missions, Sanskrit knowledge, Persianate courts, Sufi orders, merchant networks and medieval political movements. Cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Herat and Balkh were once part of the wider Indo-Persian and Central Asian world. Modern connectivity through Iran can revive these older linkages in contemporary form. Thus, India's access to Eurasia is not an artificial geopolitical project; it is a modern reactivation of ancient *trans-Asian connectivity*.

Iran's role in Eurasian access also strengthens India's diplomatic autonomy. If India possesses multiple routes and multiple partners, it becomes less vulnerable to pressure from any single country or corridor. Iran therefore contributes to India's *strategic optionality*. In an era of sanctions, wars, supply-chain disruptions and great-power rivalry, optionality is itself power.

In conclusion, Iran is indispensable to India's access to Eurasia. It provides the corridor through which India can connect with Central Asia, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe. It links India's maritime economy with continental markets and resources. It helps India participate in the emerging

connectivity politics of Eurasia. In the vocabulary of grand strategy, Iran is India's *continental gateway to the Eurasian heartland*.

6.3.3 Strategic Depth in West Asia

Iran provides India with *strategic depth in West Asia*. Strategic depth does not mean territorial control; in diplomatic language, it means the ability to maintain influence, options, partnerships and access beyond one's immediate neighbourhood. India's relations with West Asia cannot be limited to Gulf Arab states, Israel or energy trade alone. A comprehensive West Asia policy requires engagement with Iran because Iran is one of the region's oldest civilizations, largest states, most important energy actors and most influential geopolitical players.

Iran gives India strategic depth because it diversifies India's regional partnerships. India has developed strong relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq and Israel. However, excluding Iran would make India's West Asia policy incomplete and imbalanced. Iran is central to Afghanistan, the Gulf, the Caspian region, Shia political networks, regional security debates and energy geopolitics. Engagement with Iran gives India a wider diplomatic field and prevents overdependence on any one regional camp.

This strategic depth is particularly important because West Asia is a region of rivalries. Iran has tensions with the United States, Israel and several Arab states. Gulf rivalries, sectarian politics, maritime insecurity and sanctions all complicate the regional environment. India cannot afford to become a participant in these rivalries because its interests are distributed across all sides. Relations with Iran allow India to practise *balanced multi-alignment*. India can engage Tehran while also deepening ties with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Muscat and Tel Aviv.

Iran also provides strategic depth through Afghanistan. West Asia and South Asia meet in Afghanistan, and Iran is one of the most important Afghan neighbours. India's long-term Afghan interests require dialogue with Iran. Whether Afghanistan is under a republic, coalition government or Taliban rule, Iran's border, refugee concerns, ethnic ties and economic interests make it unavoidable. Thus, Iran expands India's regional diplomacy beyond purely Gulf-centric calculations.

Iran's strategic depth value also lies in its relationship with Central Asia and Russia. Through Iran, India can connect West Asia with Eurasia. This gives Indian diplomacy a north-western axis. Without Iran, India's West Asia policy risks becoming maritime and energy-centred only. With Iran, it gains continental extension. This extension is important for India's aspiration to become a major Asian power with influence across multiple theatres.

The energy dimension further strengthens strategic depth. Even when sanctions reduce direct oil imports from Iran, Iran's role in global energy politics remains important. Any crisis involving Iran can affect oil prices, shipping routes and Gulf stability. Therefore, India must maintain diplomatic channels with Iran not only for bilateral energy trade but also for energy-risk management. Engagement with Iran is a form of *strategic insurance*.

Iran also contributes to India's strategic depth by offering a civilizational bridge. India's historical connection with Persian language, Sufi thought, Indo-Persian culture, Parsi heritage and trade routes gives the relationship an emotional and intellectual foundation. In diplomacy, such civilizational capital matters because it allows countries to maintain dialogue even during political difficulty. This gives India an advantage in engaging Iran compared with countries that view Iran only through sanctions or security concerns.

However, strategic depth through Iran requires careful management. India must avoid the perception that relations with Iran are directed against Arab states, Israel or the United States. India must also reassure Iran that its relations with Iran's rivals do not represent hostility toward Tehran. This is the art of *equidistant engagement without diplomatic paralysis*. India's strength lies in speaking to all sides without surrendering autonomy.

In conclusion, Iran gives India strategic depth in West Asia by expanding India's diplomatic options, linking West Asia with Eurasia, supporting Afghan engagement, contributing to energy-risk management and strengthening regional balance. Iran is therefore not merely a partner to be engaged when convenient; it is a structural element of India's West Asian strategy. It gives India room, reach and relevance.

6.4 Iran in India's Maritime Strategy

Iran also occupies a major place in India's *maritime strategy*. India is a peninsula with long coastlines, island territories, major ports and vital sea

lanes. Its economic life depends heavily on maritime trade, energy imports and access to global markets. Iran's southern coastline on the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman connects directly with the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. This makes Iran a significant maritime partner and strategic variable in India's western seaboard policy.

India's maritime strategy is concerned with sea-lane security, port access, energy routes, naval presence, maritime domain awareness, anti-piracy, trade facilitation and regional stability. Iran intersects with all these concerns. The Persian Gulf supplies energy; the Strait of Hormuz regulates access; the Gulf of Oman connects to Chabahar; and the Arabian Sea links Indian ports with Iranian maritime gateways. Iran therefore sits at the western edge of India's maritime consciousness.

From a Mahanian perspective, sea power depends not only on navies but on ports, commerce, shipping routes and maritime partnerships. Iran's Chabahar Port allows India to use maritime power for continental access. This is an important strategic fusion. India's navy and merchant shipping can reach the Gulf of Oman; from there, cargo can move into Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Thus, Iran helps transform India's maritime geography into continental influence.

Iran's maritime importance is also linked with energy security. Oil and gas from the Gulf move through sea routes that pass near Iran. Even when India imports from other Gulf states, the security of those routes depends on regional stability involving Iran. Therefore, India's maritime strategy cannot ignore Iran. A maritime strategy that excludes Iran would fail to understand the western Indian Ocean's energy geography.

6.4.1 Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean Linkage

The Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean linkage is central to Iran's role in India's maritime strategy. India's western coastline opens into the Arabian Sea, which leads toward the Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Red Sea and East African coast. Iran's Gulf of Oman coastline, particularly Chabahar, lies across this maritime space. This makes India and Iran natural maritime interlocutors. The sea does not separate them; it connects them through a shared strategic waterway.

The Arabian Sea has historically linked India with Iran, Arabia and East Africa. Merchants from Gujarat, Sindh, Malabar and the Persian Gulf moved

across these waters for centuries. Today, the same maritime space carries oil tankers, container ships, naval vessels and strategic cargo. The nature of exchange has changed, but the geographical logic remains constant. The Arabian Sea continues to function as a *civilizational and commercial corridor*.

Iran's coastline on the Gulf of Oman gives India a direct maritime route to Iranian territory. This is particularly important because Chabahar is located outside the most congested interior of the Persian Gulf. It opens toward the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, making it more accessible for Indian shipping. This gives India a practical maritime platform for continental outreach. Through Chabahar, India's western ports can connect to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The Indian Ocean linkage also places Iran within India's broader maritime vision. India increasingly views itself as a net security provider and responsible maritime actor in the Indian Ocean. Its interests extend from the eastern coast of Africa to the Strait of Malacca, and from the Persian Gulf to the southern Indian Ocean. Iran's Gulf of Oman frontage lies within this wider maritime environment. Therefore, India–Iran relations have an oceanic dimension even when their discussions focus on land routes.

The Arabian Sea linkage also creates opportunities for trade. Indian ports can connect with Iranian ports for the movement of food products, pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, textiles, machinery and humanitarian supplies. Iranian exports and transit cargo can move toward India. The maritime distance is manageable, and the historical trading tradition is strong. If financial and sanctions-related obstacles are reduced, India–Iran maritime trade can expand significantly.

The linkage also has strategic value in crisis situations. If Pakistan blocks land access, the Arabian Sea remains available. If Afghanistan requires humanitarian assistance, Chabahar provides an alternative. If Central Asian states seek access to the Indian Ocean, Iran offers a route. Thus, the Arabian Sea–Indian Ocean linkage through Iran creates *strategic redundancy*. Redundancy in foreign policy means having more than one route, more than one partner and more than one option.

In conclusion, the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean linkage makes Iran a natural maritime partner for India. It connects India's western seaboard to Iran's Gulf of Oman coast and transforms maritime proximity into strategic opportunity.

Through this linkage, India can convert sea access into continental reach. Iran thereby becomes a maritime bridge to Eurasia.

6.4.2 Energy Sea Routes

Energy sea routes are at the heart of India's maritime strategy, and Iran is central to their security. India's economy depends heavily on imported oil and gas, much of which comes from the Persian Gulf and surrounding West Asian region. These supplies travel through maritime routes that pass through or near the Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea. Iran's proximity to these routes gives it a major place in India's energy-security calculations.

The sea route from the Persian Gulf to India is one of the most important arteries of the Indian economy. Oil tankers leave Gulf ports, pass through the Strait of Hormuz, enter the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea, and then reach Indian ports and refineries. Any disruption along this route can affect fuel prices, inflation, industrial production, transportation and India's balance of payments. Therefore, energy sea routes are not merely commercial lines; they are *lifelines of national development*.

Iran's role is significant because it is both an energy producer and a strategic actor near the routes used by other Gulf exporters. Even if India's direct oil imports from Iran are constrained by sanctions, Iran's influence on Gulf security affects Indian energy imports from the entire region. A crisis involving Iran can raise shipping risk and global oil prices even when cargo does not originate in Iran. This makes Iran relevant to India's energy security beyond bilateral trade.

The Strait of Hormuz is the most sensitive point in this system. It is one of the world's most important oil chokepoints. Its narrow geography makes it vulnerable to crisis, and its importance magnifies the effect of regional tensions. India must therefore maintain diplomatic relations with Iran as part of its energy-risk management. Dialogue with Tehran helps India understand the security environment and preserve channels during crises.

Energy sea routes also require maritime security. Tankers, LNG carriers and merchant vessels need safe passage. Threats may include war, mines, drone attacks, piracy, terrorism, accidents and geopolitical escalation. India's navy has an interest in the safety of sea lines of communication. Iran's location near these sea lines makes maritime stability with Iran a matter of practical importance.

The energy route also links India's Iran policy with its relations with Arab Gulf states. India imports energy from several Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait. Many of these supplies move through maritime routes affected by Iran's regional posture. India must therefore balance its relations carefully. It cannot allow hostility with Iran to endanger energy routes, nor can it allow closeness with Iran to damage relations with Arab suppliers. This is a classic case of *energy diplomacy through regional balance*.

Energy sea routes also show why India must diversify without abandoning engagement. India can develop renewable energy, strategic petroleum reserves, alternative suppliers and LNG infrastructure, but the Gulf route will remain important for a long time. Therefore, India's policy must combine diversification with diplomacy. Iran remains a key actor in that diplomacy.

In conclusion, energy sea routes make Iran indispensable to India's maritime strategy. Iran's proximity to the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman places it near the arteries through which India's energy flows. For India, engaging Iran is not only a matter of bilateral friendship; it is a requirement of *maritime energy security*.

6.4.3 Port Diplomacy and Maritime Security

Port diplomacy has become a major instrument of twenty-first-century foreign policy, and Chabahar is the central example of India's port diplomacy with Iran. Port diplomacy refers to the use of ports, terminals, logistics facilities, maritime agreements and transport corridors to advance national interests. It combines infrastructure with strategy, commerce with diplomacy, and geography with influence. In India–Iran relations, Chabahar represents the transformation of historical friendship into *infrastructure-based geopolitics*.

Chabahar's importance lies in its multiple functions. It is a port for bilateral trade, a corridor to Afghanistan, a gateway to Central Asia, a component of the INSTC, and an alternative to Pakistan-controlled routes. It also allows India to participate in regional development and humanitarian assistance. This multifunctional character gives Chabahar unusual strategic weight. It is not a single-purpose project; it is a *geoeconomic platform*.

The long-term contract for Shahid Beheshti terminal gives India's role in Chabahar greater stability. A long-term arrangement is important because

infrastructure requires continuity, predictability and institutional confidence. Short-term arrangements cannot create strategic depth. By participating in Chabahar's development and operation, India strengthens its maritime presence in the Gulf of Oman and creates a durable connectivity mechanism with Iran.

Port diplomacy also enhances India's regional image. Through Chabahar, India presents itself as a development-oriented, connectivity-focused and responsible regional actor. It offers Afghanistan and Central Asia access to the sea. It supports trade rather than coercion. It provides an alternative corridor without demanding exclusive alignment. This gives India a softer and more acceptable strategic profile compared with projects perceived as debt-driven or domination-oriented.

Maritime security is closely linked with port diplomacy. Ports require safe sea lanes, stable coastal environments, secure cargo movement and reliable shipping. Chabahar's success depends not only on cranes and terminals but also on the security of the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman and regional land routes. India and Iran therefore have shared interests in preventing piracy, terrorism, smuggling, instability and maritime disruption.

Port diplomacy also strengthens India's strategic autonomy. By investing in Chabahar, India reduces dependence on routes controlled by Pakistan and gains a platform in Iran's maritime geography. It also diversifies India's connectivity options at a time when China's port investments in the Indian Ocean and Pakistan have increased. Chabahar provides India with an independent strategic asset, though it must be managed carefully due to sanctions and regional tensions.

The maritime-security dimension also includes the protection of sea lines of communication. India's trade and energy imports depend on secure SLOCs across the Arabian Sea and western Indian Ocean. Iran's coastline lies near these routes. Communication with Iran, therefore, contributes to maritime risk reduction. Even when India and Iran do not conduct extensive naval cooperation, diplomatic engagement helps manage the broader maritime environment.

However, port diplomacy faces obstacles. Sanctions on Iran complicate finance, insurance, technology transfer and commercial participation. Regional tensions may discourage private investors. Afghanistan's instability affects transit cargo. Bureaucratic delays and infrastructure gaps slow

progress. These challenges require what may be called *strategic patience*. India must persist because the long-term geopolitical value of Chabahar is greater than short-term operational difficulties.

Port diplomacy through Iran also requires balance with other Indian maritime partnerships. India works closely with Oman, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf actors. It has growing ties with Israel and the United States. Chabahar must be presented not as an anti-anyone project, but as a regional connectivity project. This diplomatic framing is essential. The port's success depends partly on India's ability to communicate its inclusive and developmental purpose.

In conclusion, Iran is central to India's port diplomacy and maritime-security strategy. Chabahar gives India a port-based route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, strengthens India's western maritime presence, supports regional connectivity and enhances strategic autonomy. Maritime security ensures that this port diplomacy remains operationally viable. Together, port diplomacy and maritime security make Iran one of the most significant maritime partners in India's extended-neighbourhood strategy.

Concluding Observation

Iran's importance for India lies in its rare ability to serve both India's *continental strategy* and *maritime strategy*. On land, Iran helps India bypass Pakistan, access Eurasia and deepen its West Asian strategic presence. At sea, Iran links India with the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf and vital energy routes. Through Chabahar, these two strategies meet. The port is the point where India's maritime capability becomes continental access.

In the larger architecture of Indian foreign policy, Iran is therefore not a secondary actor. It is a *dual-domain strategic partner*—continental and maritime, historical and contemporary, civilizational and geoeconomic. It allows India to overcome geographical constraints, diversify energy routes, strengthen regional presence, engage Afghanistan and Central Asia, and preserve strategic autonomy in a turbulent West Asian environment. Iran's location gives it power; India's engagement gives that geography diplomatic meaning.

Chapter 7:

Energy Security and India–Iran Relations

Energy security is one of the most decisive foundations of India–Iran relations. While history, civilization, culture, connectivity and regional strategy give the relationship its intellectual and diplomatic depth, energy gives it an immediate material urgency. India is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing energy-consuming economies, and its developmental trajectory requires reliable access to oil, natural gas, petroleum products, electricity, transport fuel, fertilizers, petrochemicals and industrial energy. Iran, situated at the heart of West Asian energy geography and endowed with vast hydrocarbon resources, has historically occupied an important place in India's energy imagination. Therefore, India–Iran relations cannot be fully understood without analysing the question of *energy security*.

The meaning of *energy security* is broader than the simple purchase of oil or gas. It includes *availability, affordability, accessibility, reliability, diversification, resilience, transport safety, payment mechanisms, strategic reserves, infrastructure, long-term contracts, geopolitical stability and crisis management*. In the case of India and Iran, energy security is also connected with sanctions, maritime chokepoints, the Strait of Hormuz, West Asian conflicts, global oil prices, refinery requirements, currency arrangements and strategic autonomy. Thus, energy diplomacy is not a narrow commercial activity; it is a form of *geoeconomic statecraft*.

India's interest in Iranian energy has historically been shaped by complementarity. India is a major energy importer; Iran is a major hydrocarbon holder. India needs diversified supplies; Iran needs stable Asian markets. India seeks affordable energy to sustain growth; Iran seeks economic partners to withstand sanctions and regional pressures. This complementarity has often been interrupted by external factors, especially United States sanctions, payment restrictions, insurance difficulties, shipping constraints and geopolitical volatility. Yet the structural logic of India–Iran energy cooperation has not disappeared. It remains an underlying possibility within the larger bilateral relationship.

Energy security also gives India's Iran policy a special diplomatic complexity. India has major energy relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Russia, the United States and other suppliers. India also has strategic partnerships with the United States, Israel and Gulf Arab states, many of whom have complicated relations with Iran. Therefore, India cannot pursue energy cooperation with Iran in isolation. It must balance Iranian energy opportunities with wider diplomatic constraints. This is why India's Iran energy policy may be described as *calibrated energy pragmatism*.

In the language of Daniel Yergin's *The Prize* and *The Quest*, energy is never merely a commodity; it is power, security, wealth and political leverage. The history of modern international relations confirms that oil and gas shape alliances, wars, sanctions, development strategies and national vulnerabilities. India's relationship with Iran must be situated within this larger logic. Iran's energy resources and geographical proximity to vital sea routes make it not only a supplier but also a strategic actor in the global energy system.

7.1 India's Energy Requirements

India's energy requirements have expanded dramatically because of economic growth, industrialization, urbanization, transport expansion, population size, rising incomes, infrastructure development and the aspirations of a growing middle class. A country of India's demographic scale cannot sustain development without a large and reliable energy base. Energy fuels factories, farms, transport networks, households, digital infrastructure, refineries, petrochemical units, defence systems and urban life. Therefore, India's energy requirement is not a sectoral issue; it is a national-development imperative.

India's energy profile is marked by a paradox. On the one hand, India is pursuing ambitious renewable-energy expansion, solar power, green hydrogen, biofuels, electric mobility and energy efficiency. On the other hand, oil and gas continue to remain indispensable for transportation, industry, petrochemicals, cooking, aviation, fertilizers and urban infrastructure. The transition to cleaner energy is real, but it does not immediately eliminate hydrocarbon dependence. This creates a dual challenge: India must accelerate energy transition while simultaneously

securing conventional energy supplies. This duality may be called India's *transitional energy dilemma*.

Oil remains especially important because it dominates transport and several industrial sectors. Diesel powers freight, agriculture, construction, mining and logistics. Petrol supports personal mobility. Aviation turbine fuel supports civil aviation and tourism. LPG supports household cooking and clean-energy access. Naphtha and other petroleum products support petrochemicals and industry. Thus, India's oil demand is rooted in the everyday functioning of the economy. A sudden oil-supply disruption can affect inflation, transport costs, food prices and industrial output.

Natural gas is also gaining importance in India's energy strategy. India seeks to increase the share of gas in its energy mix because gas is cleaner than coal and oil, useful for city-gas distribution, fertilizers, petrochemicals, refining, power balancing and industrial fuel. However, domestic gas production is not sufficient to meet rising demand. This means India must rely more heavily on imported LNG and long-term gas-supply arrangements. Iran's large gas reserves therefore remain relevant to India's long-term energy imagination, even though sanctions and geopolitical constraints have repeatedly obstructed major gas projects.

India's energy requirements also have a regional dimension. A large share of India's energy imports comes from West Asia and travels through maritime routes passing near the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea. This connects India's energy policy with its West Asia policy, maritime strategy and Iran policy. Energy security is therefore not merely about refineries and contracts; it is about diplomacy, shipping, sea-lane protection, regional stability and strategic reserves.

In this context, Iran becomes important for three reasons. First, it has major oil and gas reserves. Second, it is geographically close to India compared with distant suppliers. Third, it sits near the maritime routes through which much Gulf energy flows toward India. Therefore, even when direct energy imports from Iran are affected by sanctions, Iran remains central to India's energy-security environment. India's energy requirements make engagement with Iran a matter of strategic prudence.

7.1.1 Growing Demand for Oil and Gas

India's demand for oil and gas is growing because of the scale and velocity of its economic transformation. Urbanization is expanding cities; industrialization is increasing the need for transport, materials and manufacturing energy; highways, airports, ports and logistics corridors are expanding; household consumption is rising; and the middle class is becoming more mobile. These developments create sustained demand for petroleum products. Oil remains deeply embedded in India's economic structure.

The growth of diesel demand is particularly important. Diesel is the fuel of freight movement, agricultural machinery, construction equipment, mining vehicles, buses and backup power in many sectors. India's economic expansion requires the movement of goods across long distances, and such logistics remain heavily dependent on diesel. Therefore, diesel demand reflects not only mobility but also the deeper pulse of the productive economy. When industry grows, roads expand and goods move, diesel consumption rises. This makes oil security central to economic planning.

Petrol demand is also linked to rising incomes and expanding personal mobility. As more Indians purchase two-wheelers, cars and other vehicles, transport energy demand increases. Electric mobility will gradually reduce some future demand, but transition takes time because of vehicle costs, charging infrastructure, grid readiness and consumer behaviour. Therefore, oil will remain important even during the energy transition. India's foreign policy must plan for this long transitional period, rather than assume an immediate replacement of hydrocarbons.

Aviation fuel demand is another symbol of India's changing economy. Growth in domestic tourism, business travel, airport expansion and civil aviation increases jet-fuel requirements. Aviation is difficult to decarbonize quickly. This means that oil demand in the aviation sector may remain strong for years. As India becomes a larger aviation market, secure access to petroleum products becomes increasingly important.

LPG demand reflects a different dimension of energy security: household welfare. India's clean-cooking programmes have expanded LPG access and reduced reliance on traditional biomass in many households. This has public-health, gender, environmental and welfare implications. However, expanded

LPG use also increases import dependence. Thus, social welfare policy and energy-import policy become connected. A cylinder in a rural kitchen is linked, indirectly, to global gas markets, shipping routes and foreign policy.

Natural gas demand is expected to grow because India wants a cleaner fuel for city-gas distribution, compressed natural gas vehicles, fertilizers, refineries, petrochemicals and industry. Gas can support lower-emission industrialization and help balance energy transition. Yet the domestic gas supply is limited, and imported LNG is exposed to global market volatility. This gives gas diplomacy growing importance. Long-term LNG contracts, spot-market management, pipeline possibilities and strategic supplier relations will increasingly shape India's energy policy.

Iran's relevance in this context arises from its hydrocarbon endowment. Iran possesses vast reserves of oil and natural gas. Historically, India imported crude from Iran because Iranian crude suited several Indian refineries and because proximity lowered transport costs. Iran's gas resources also generated interest in pipeline and LNG possibilities, including ideas such as the Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline, though geopolitical obstacles prevented realization. These projects reveal that India's energy demand has long created a structural incentive for engagement with Iran.

However, growing demand also increases vulnerability. A country that imports a large share of its oil and gas becomes sensitive to price shocks, sanctions, war, shipping disruption, currency volatility and supply manipulation. India's growth therefore makes energy diversification essential. Iran can be one component of such diversification, but India must also maintain suppliers across West Asia, Russia, Africa, the Americas and other regions. Energy security requires *plurality of sources*.

The growth in oil and gas demand also affects India's strategic behaviour. India must maintain good relations with energy suppliers, support maritime stability, build strategic petroleum reserves, develop refining capacity, invest in energy diplomacy and avoid excessive exposure to any single region. India's Iran policy is part of this wider framework. Iran is not merely a supplier; it is a factor in the stability of the energy routes India depends upon.

In conclusion, India's growing demand for oil and gas makes energy security a permanent priority in foreign policy. Oil fuels mobility and industry; gas supports cleaner growth and urban transition; LPG supports welfare; aviation

fuel supports connectivity; and petrochemicals support manufacturing. Iran's energy resources and location make it highly relevant to these requirements. The central issue is not whether India needs energy; the issue is how India secures energy under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty. This is where India–Iran relations acquire their strategic significance.

7.1.2 Dependence on West Asian Energy

India's dependence on West Asian energy is one of the most important realities of its foreign policy. West Asia contains some of the world's largest reserves of oil and gas, and its geographical proximity to India makes it a natural energy source. Crude oil and LNG from the Persian Gulf and surrounding region can reach Indian ports through relatively short maritime routes. This proximity has historically made West Asia central to India's energy-security architecture. Even when India diversifies toward Russia, Africa, the United States and Latin America, West Asia remains indispensable.

The Persian Gulf is especially important because it contains major energy-exporting states such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Iran. Many of these states have long-term commercial relations with Indian refiners. Their supplies move through maritime routes that pass through or near the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Thus, India's dependence on West Asian energy is simultaneously a dependence on West Asian diplomacy, maritime stability and chokepoint security.

Iran occupies a distinctive position within this energy geography. It is both an energy-rich state and a country located near the crucial routes through which Gulf energy flows. India's energy dependence on West Asia therefore makes Iran important even when India's direct imports from Iran fluctuate due to sanctions. A crisis involving Iran can affect oil prices, tanker movements, insurance costs and supply expectations across the region. Therefore, Iran's relevance to India's energy security extends beyond bilateral crude purchases.

India's dependence on West Asian energy also explains why India follows a careful balancing policy in the region. India has strong relations with Arab Gulf states, Israel, Iran, Iraq and other actors. It cannot afford to be drawn into regional rivalries because its energy interests are spread across different political camps. India's diplomacy must therefore remain *equidistant*,

interest-based and de-escalatory. This is not diplomatic weakness; it is a necessity created by energy geography.

West Asian energy dependence also affects India's domestic economy. Oil-price increases can raise inflation, transport costs, fertilizer costs, food prices and the current-account burden. Since petroleum products are deeply connected with production and consumption, external shocks can quickly become internal economic pressures. Therefore, energy diplomacy is inseparable from economic management. The Ministry of Petroleum, Ministry of External Affairs, Indian refiners, shipping companies and financial institutions all become part of the same strategic ecosystem.

The dependence on West Asian energy also creates maritime obligations. India must pay attention to sea lanes, tanker security, port access, naval presence and crisis evacuation. The energy route from West Asia to India passes through some of the world's most sensitive waters. The Strait of Hormuz is particularly important because large volumes of global oil and gas pass through it. Any tension in this area directly affects India's calculations. Iran's proximity to Hormuz makes it a necessary interlocutor in India's maritime-energy diplomacy.

India has attempted to reduce vulnerability through diversification. It imports crude from many countries and gives refiners commercial flexibility to source from different geographies. It has expanded strategic petroleum reserves, promoted renewables, developed biofuels, encouraged electric mobility and sought gas infrastructure expansion. Yet diversification does not eliminate the centrality of West Asia. The region's scale, proximity and established supply networks ensure that it will remain vital for India's energy security.

Iran's role in this dependence is complicated by sanctions. In earlier periods, Iran was an important crude supplier to India. After the reimposition of United States sanctions, India significantly reduced and later stopped regular Iranian oil imports. This shows how external pressure can interrupt natural energy complementarity. Yet the logic of India–Iran energy cooperation remains present beneath the sanctions environment. If geopolitical conditions permit, Iran can again become relevant as a supplier because of proximity, reserves and refinery compatibility.

Dependence on West Asian energy also gives India a strong interest in peace and stability in the region. India does not benefit from confrontation between

Iran and Arab states, Iran and the United States, or any regional escalation that threatens shipping. India's preferred posture is stability, dialogue and uninterrupted commerce. This explains why India often uses cautious language during West Asian crises. Energy security encourages diplomatic moderation.

In conclusion, India's dependence on West Asian energy is a structural feature of its foreign policy. It makes the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz central to India's national interest. Iran, because of its resources and location, occupies a special place in this framework. India's engagement with Iran is therefore not optional sentiment; it is part of a wider strategy to protect energy flows, diversify suppliers, manage regional risk and preserve strategic autonomy.

7.1.3 Energy Security as a Foreign Policy Priority

Energy security has become one of the foremost priorities of Indian foreign policy. In earlier decades, foreign policy was often discussed mainly in terms of borders, wars, alliances, decolonization, ideology and diplomacy. In the contemporary era, energy has become equally important because economic growth, industrial capacity, military preparedness, food security, transportation, urban life and technological development all depend upon reliable energy supplies. A nation's external power is deeply connected with its internal energy resilience. Therefore, energy security is a central pillar of *national security*.

For India, energy security has several dimensions. The first is supply security: India must ensure that sufficient oil, gas and petroleum products are available. The second is price security: energy must remain affordable because high prices affect inflation and development. The third is route security: tankers and cargo must move safely through sea lanes and chokepoints. The fourth is supplier diversification: India must avoid excessive dependence on any one country. The fifth is institutional preparedness: strategic reserves, refineries, pipelines, LNG terminals and emergency-response mechanisms must be strengthened. The sixth is diplomatic flexibility: India must maintain relations with multiple suppliers despite global rivalries.

Iran becomes relevant to almost all these dimensions. As a hydrocarbon-rich state, it is a potential supplier. As a country located near the Strait of Hormuz, it is central to route security. As a West Asian power, it influences regional

stability. As a state under sanctions, it tests India's ability to balance energy needs with international financial and diplomatic constraints. Thus, Iran is both an opportunity and a challenge for India's energy diplomacy.

Energy security is also linked with strategic autonomy. If India's energy supplies are vulnerable to pressure, India's diplomatic freedom narrows. A country that cannot secure fuel cannot act confidently in world politics. Therefore, India seeks diversified imports, strategic reserves, renewable expansion, refinery flexibility and diplomatic relations across competing blocs. Iran's inclusion in India's energy calculus reflects this desire for autonomy. India does not wish to be told permanently which suppliers are permissible if national interest demands flexibility.

The foreign-policy importance of energy became especially visible during global crises. Wars, sanctions, pandemic disruptions, shipping attacks, Gulf tensions and price shocks have shown that energy markets can change rapidly. India's response has been to widen its procurement base, negotiate with multiple suppliers, maintain refinery flexibility and avoid ideological rigidity. This is *energy pragmatism*. It means that India's energy decisions are guided by availability, affordability, reliability and national interest.

Energy security also shapes India's relations with major powers. The United States, Russia, Gulf states, Iran and global energy institutions all influence India's energy options. India's purchase decisions can have diplomatic consequences. Buying from sanctioned countries can create pressure; avoiding certain suppliers can increase costs; dependence on a small group of suppliers can create vulnerability. Therefore, energy diplomacy requires constant balancing. Iran is one of the most delicate examples of this balancing.

India's strategic petroleum reserves are another element of energy-security policy. Reserves provide a cushion during supply disruptions, though they cannot replace long-term supply diversification. India's reserve policy reflects recognition that international energy markets are vulnerable to war, sanctions and chokepoint crises. A disruption in West Asia can affect Indian consumers and industry. Therefore, reserves, diversification and diplomacy must operate together.

Energy security also intersects with climate policy. India is committed to expanding renewable energy and reducing carbon intensity, but it cannot

ignore developmental needs. A just energy transition requires that India maintain growth while gradually decarbonizing. Gas may act as a transition fuel in some sectors, and oil will remain necessary in transport, aviation and industry for years. Therefore, India's foreign policy must secure conventional energy even while supporting clean energy transformation. This is India's *dual-track energy diplomacy*.

In the India–Iran context, energy security requires careful policy design. India must preserve dialogue with Iran because of Iran's resources and location. It must also manage sanctions, banking systems, shipping insurance and relations with other partners. It must remain open to cooperation when conditions permit while avoiding overdependence. This approach allows India to protect its interests without unnecessary confrontation.

Energy security also deepens the strategic meaning of Chabahar and connectivity. Although Chabahar is primarily discussed as a trade and transit project, it also supports energy security indirectly by strengthening India's access to Iran, Central Asia and Eurasia. Connectivity diversification and energy diversification are related. A country with more routes has more choices; a country with more choices has greater resilience.

In conclusion, energy security has become a foreign-policy priority because India's rise depends upon stable, affordable and diversified energy access. Iran's energy resources, maritime location and geopolitical weight make it a significant factor in this priority. India–Iran relations in the energy domain therefore represent a complex interaction of hydrocarbons, sanctions, sea lanes, strategic autonomy and regional balance. In the refined language of diplomacy, energy security is the *material foundation of India's external sovereignty*, and Iran remains one of the important actors in that foundation.

Concluding Observation

India's energy requirements make energy security a central theme in India–Iran relations. India's growing demand for oil and gas, its dependence on West Asian energy, and its need to protect maritime routes and diversify suppliers all give Iran continuing relevance. Iran possesses major hydrocarbon resources, occupies a strategic location near the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, and provides India with possibilities for both energy cooperation and regional risk management.

The India–Iran energy relationship has often been constrained by sanctions, payment difficulties and geopolitical pressure. Yet the structural complementarity remains. India needs diversified energy sources and secure routes; Iran needs reliable Asian partners and markets. Therefore, energy security gives the relationship a durable geoeconomic logic. In the broader architecture of Indian foreign policy, energy is not merely a commodity; it is a *strategic lifeline*, and Iran is one of the significant states situated along that lifeline.

7.2 Iran as an Energy Supplier

Iran's significance as an energy supplier for India arises from a rare convergence of *resource abundance*, *geographical proximity*, *civilizational familiarity*, *refinery compatibility* and *strategic complementarity*. Iran is not merely another hydrocarbon-producing state in West Asia; it is one of the world's major energy-bearing countries, endowed with vast reserves of oil and natural gas and located near the maritime routes that carry energy from the Persian Gulf to Asian markets. For India, whose developmental trajectory requires secure and diversified access to hydrocarbons, Iran has long represented a potentially valuable energy partner.

The logic of Iran as an energy supplier rests upon the structural relationship between a major energy-consuming economy and a major energy-producing state. India's industrialization, transport expansion, urbanization, petrochemical growth and fertilizer needs require oil and gas. Iran's economy, constrained by sanctions and dependent on hydrocarbon revenue, requires stable markets and dependable buyers. This creates a powerful *geoeconomic complementarity*. India needs energy security; Iran needs energy monetization. In principle, therefore, India and Iran are naturally placed for long-term energy cooperation.

Iran's energy importance for India is also strengthened by geography. Iranian oil and gas are relatively close to Indian refineries and ports compared with supplies from more distant regions. Shorter distance can reduce freight costs, improve supply responsiveness and create logistical familiarity. Historically, Indian refiners valued Iranian crude because of commercial terms, quality, credit arrangements and shipping advantages. Iranian supply, when available under stable diplomatic conditions, could fit India's larger strategy of

diversifying imports across West Asia, Russia, Africa, the Americas and other regions.

However, the India–Iran energy relationship has always existed within a difficult geopolitical environment. Iran’s nuclear controversy, United States sanctions, restrictions on banking, insurance and shipping, and pressure on importing countries have repeatedly interrupted energy trade. This means that Iran’s role as an energy supplier has been marked by a paradox: it is strategically attractive but politically constrained. In the refined language of energy diplomacy, Iran is a *high-potential but high-pressure supplier*.

From the perspective of major energy studies such as Daniel Yergin’s *The Prize* and *The Quest*, oil and gas are never merely commodities; they are instruments of national power, diplomatic leverage and economic vulnerability. The India–Iran energy relationship demonstrates this truth. Commercial purchase decisions are shaped by refinery economics, but also by sanctions, global power politics, payment channels, maritime security and strategic autonomy. Thus, the question of Iranian energy is simultaneously economic, diplomatic and geopolitical.

7.2.1 Iranian Oil

Iranian oil has historically been one of the most important pillars of India–Iran economic relations. Crude oil from Iran supplied Indian refineries for many years and contributed to India’s broader West Asian energy basket. Iran offered proximity, established trading channels, and at times commercially attractive terms. For India, Iranian crude was important not only because of volume, but because it helped diversify supply sources. Diversification is central to energy security: no large importing country wishes to depend excessively on a small number of suppliers.

The attractiveness of Iranian oil for India has several dimensions. First, Iran is geographically close to India, and maritime transportation from Iranian terminals to Indian ports is comparatively convenient. Second, several Indian refineries have experience processing Iranian crude grades. Third, Iran has historically offered flexible commercial arrangements, including credit periods and shipping terms, especially when it sought to preserve market share under sanctions pressure. Fourth, Iranian oil gave India bargaining space in negotiations with other suppliers. A diversified buyer is a stronger buyer.

Iranian oil also has a strategic dimension because it connects India's energy security with the Persian Gulf. India imports significant energy from West Asia, and Iran is a major state in that energy geography. Even when India's direct Iranian oil imports are interrupted, Iran's role in the Gulf continues to affect prices and shipping risks. Therefore, Iranian oil matters both as a supply source and as a factor in the larger energy environment.

Before the tightening of United States sanctions, Iran was among India's major oil suppliers. Indian refiners imported substantial volumes of Iranian crude, and Iran periodically ranked among India's leading sources. This relationship was not merely commercial; it gave India an additional pillar in its energy diversification strategy. In periods when Iranian imports were strong, India could balance supplies from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Nigeria and other countries.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action period after 2015 briefly revived prospects for Iranian oil. With partial sanctions relief, Iran attempted to regain market share, and Asian buyers, including India, increased engagement. This showed that when political constraints ease, the underlying commercial logic of Iranian oil returns quickly. India's refineries and Iran's export ambitions naturally moved toward each other. However, the reimposition of sanctions after the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement again disrupted this logic.

The decline of Indian imports from Iran after 2018–2019 demonstrated how sanctions can override economic complementarity. Even if Iranian crude is commercially attractive, banks, insurers, shipping firms and refiners must operate within international financial risk. Oil trade is not only a buyer-seller transaction; it requires vessels, insurance, payments, letters of credit, ports, classification services and compliance systems. Sanctions attack this entire ecosystem. Therefore, Indian imports declined not because Iran lost energy relevance, but because the transaction became diplomatically and financially hazardous.

Iranian oil also affects India's strategic autonomy debate. India prefers freedom to purchase energy from any supplier according to national interest. However, secondary sanctions constrain that freedom. The Iranian case therefore illustrates a central dilemma of twenty-first-century energy diplomacy: how can a developing country preserve affordable energy access

when global financial systems are shaped by great-power sanctions? India's response has been cautious diversification, not rhetorical confrontation.

In future, Iranian oil may again become significant for India if sanctions conditions change or if structured exemptions become available. India's refineries retain commercial interest in diversified crude sources, and Iran remains eager for stable Asian markets. Yet any revival would depend on sanctions relief, payment mechanisms, insurance availability, shipping safety, pricing competitiveness and India's wider relations with the United States, Gulf states and other suppliers.

Thus, Iranian oil is important not only as fuel but as a strategic variable. It touches India's refinery economics, energy diversification, foreign policy autonomy, relations with the United States, Gulf diplomacy and maritime security. In the language of energy geopolitics, Iranian oil represents *both opportunity and constraint*.

7.2.2 Iranian Natural Gas

Iranian natural gas is of immense long-term significance for India because Iran possesses one of the world's largest natural-gas reserve bases. Gas is becoming increasingly important in India's energy strategy because it is cleaner than coal and oil, useful for fertilizer production, city-gas distribution, petrochemicals, refining, industrial heating and power balancing. India's ambition to increase the role of gas in its energy mix makes Iran's natural-gas resources strategically attractive. However, the gas relationship has remained less developed than the oil relationship because gas requires more complex infrastructure, investment and political stability.

Natural gas differs from oil in a crucial way: oil can be transported relatively easily by tanker, but gas usually requires pipelines or liquefaction, LNG terminals, regasification facilities and long-term contractual arrangements. Therefore, gas diplomacy is more infrastructure-heavy and politically sensitive. A gas partnership between India and Iran would require sustained confidence, stable investment conditions, technology, financing and exemption from sanctions risks. This complexity has repeatedly prevented the full realization of India–Iran gas cooperation.

The most famous example was the Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline proposal. The project imagined transporting Iranian gas through Pakistan to India. In theory, it would have provided India with a major source of pipeline gas and

connected South Asia with Iranian energy. In practice, the project faced severe obstacles: India–Pakistan mistrust, security risks, pricing disputes, transit concerns, United States opposition, sanctions risks and uncertainty over supply reliability. The project became a symbol of energy possibility constrained by geopolitics.

Iranian gas also attracted interest through potential LNG routes. If Iran could develop liquefaction facilities and export LNG, India could import Iranian gas by sea without depending on Pakistan transit. However, sanctions limited Iran's access to technology and investment required for large-scale LNG development. Natural gas therefore remained a strategic possibility more than a fully operational pillar of India–Iran energy trade. This demonstrates how sanctions can immobilize even highly rational energy projects.

The importance of Iranian gas for India lies partly in India's fertilizer sector. Natural gas is a key feedstock for urea and other fertilizers. India's food security is connected with fertilizer availability, and fertilizer availability is connected with gas supply. Therefore, gas imports are not merely industrial transactions; they affect agriculture and rural welfare. Iran's gas reserves could, under favourable conditions, contribute to India's fertilizer and petrochemical security.

Iranian gas also matters for India's climate and transition strategy. India seeks to reduce the carbon intensity of growth while preserving developmental momentum. Gas can serve as a transition fuel in sectors where immediate electrification or renewable substitution is difficult. It is not a final solution to climate change, but it can reduce emissions relative to coal and oil in certain applications. Therefore, long-term access to gas, including potential Iranian gas, remains relevant.

However, Indian policymakers must evaluate Iranian gas through a realistic lens. Iran's domestic gas demand is high, its infrastructure requires investment, and sanctions restrict external partnerships. Gas exports require pipelines, LNG facilities or swaps through neighbouring countries. Each option involves political and technical risks. Thus, Iranian gas is strategically attractive but operationally difficult. It represents *latent energy potential* rather than immediate energy certainty.

Iranian gas also has a Central Asian dimension. Iran's location could theoretically support swaps, transit arrangements and regional gas networks

involving Turkmenistan, the Caspian region and South Asia. Such arrangements would require stable regional cooperation and sanctions flexibility. If developed, Iran could become a gas hub connecting Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and South Asia. For India, this would expand energy options beyond direct bilateral purchase.

In conclusion, Iranian natural gas is one of the most important long-term possibilities in India–Iran relations. It could support India's gas-based economy, fertilizer production, cleaner industrial growth and energy diversification. Yet political obstacles, sanctions, infrastructure gaps and regional mistrust have prevented its full realization. Iranian gas is therefore a strategic promise waiting for a more favourable geopolitical environment.

7.2.3 Importance of Iran for Energy Diversification

Iran is important for India's energy diversification because a large energy-importing country cannot rely excessively on a limited group of suppliers. Diversification is the central doctrine of modern energy security. It means diversifying suppliers, routes, fuels, contracts, currencies, technologies and reserves. For India, Iran provides diversification in at least three ways: as a potential oil supplier, as a major gas reserve holder, and as a geopolitical actor near critical energy sea routes.

Energy diversification protects India from supply disruption, price manipulation, regional conflict and diplomatic pressure. If India imports too heavily from a few suppliers, it becomes vulnerable to production cuts, wars, sanctions or political bargaining. Iran, when available as a supplier, adds one more source to India's import basket. This strengthens India's bargaining power with other suppliers and reduces dependence on any single country or bloc.

Iran's geographical proximity enhances its diversification value. Distant supplies from the Americas or Africa may be useful, but they involve longer shipping routes and higher logistical complexity. Iran lies close to India's western maritime approaches. This proximity gives it natural commercial value. Energy diversification is not only about the number of suppliers; it is also about their location, reliability and route accessibility. Iran's location makes it valuable in this regard.

Iranian energy also provides diversification from within West Asia itself. India's West Asian energy basket has included Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE,

Kuwait, Qatar and others. Iran can add balance within this regional basket. This is important because West Asian politics is not monolithic. Different suppliers have different alignments, pricing policies, production capacities and diplomatic priorities. Importing from multiple West Asian sources gives India greater flexibility.

Iran is also important because of its reserves. A country with large reserves can remain relevant over decades. Even if current imports are low or suspended, the reserve base creates future possibility. India's energy planning must look beyond immediate sanctions cycles. A serious energy strategy must consider what may become possible under changed political conditions. Iran's vast oil and gas reserves make it impossible for India to ignore the country permanently.

The diversification value of Iran is also related to refinery economics. Indian refiners often adjust crude slates based on price, quality, availability and refining configuration. Iranian crude, when accessible, can add flexibility to refinery operations. Flexibility helps refiners optimize costs and output. Therefore, Iranian oil can support not only national strategy but also commercial efficiency.

Iran's energy diversification value also strengthens India's strategic autonomy. If India retains the option of Iranian energy, it reduces vulnerability to pressure from other producers or political groups. However, sanctions have limited this autonomy. India's challenge is to preserve the diplomatic possibility of future Iranian imports while complying with practical constraints. This requires a careful balance between ambition and caution.

Energy diversification also includes route diversification. Iran's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz is both a risk and a reason for engagement. India must maintain relations with Iran to understand and manage the security of energy routes. Even when Indian oil comes from Arab Gulf states, the route may pass through waters affected by Iran's regional posture. Thus, Iran is part of route security as well as supply diversification.

In conclusion, Iran's importance for energy diversification lies in its resources, proximity, refinery relevance, gas potential, and role in Gulf energy-route security. Sanctions may interrupt imports, but they do not erase

structural significance. In the deeper logic of Indian foreign policy, Iran remains an indispensable element of *energy optionality*.

7.3 Impact of Sanctions on Energy Trade

Sanctions have been the single most disruptive factor in India–Iran energy trade. They have transformed a natural energy partnership into a constrained and uncertain relationship. India and Iran possess strong structural complementarity: India needs energy, and Iran has energy. Yet sanctions have repeatedly interrupted oil imports, blocked investment, complicated payments, discouraged shipping and insurance, and created compliance risks for Indian companies. Thus, sanctions represent the external political layer imposed upon an otherwise rational economic relationship.

The impact of sanctions must be understood in institutional terms. Modern oil trade depends on banks, insurers, shipping companies, classification societies, ports, refiners, traders, currency channels and legal compliance systems. U.S. sanctions, especially secondary sanctions, do not merely target Iran directly; they threaten non-U.S. entities that conduct significant transactions with Iran. This creates a powerful deterrent effect. Even when India wants to buy Iranian oil, commercial actors may fear penalties, loss of dollar access or reputational risk. Sanctions therefore operate through *financial extraterritoriality*.

Sanctions have also affected investment in Iranian oil and gas fields. Indian companies have shown interest in Iranian upstream opportunities, but sanctions have made investment difficult. Energy cooperation requires long-term capital, technology and contractual certainty. Sanctions create uncertainty and raise risk premiums. As a result, potential cooperation in fields, gas infrastructure, LNG and petrochemicals has remained underdeveloped. This is one of the major lost opportunities in India–Iran relations.

Sanctions have also affected payment mechanisms. At various times, India and Iran explored rupee payment systems, escrow arrangements and non-dollar channels. Such mechanisms can partly reduce pressure, but they are not perfect substitutes for normal banking. Oil trade at scale requires robust financial infrastructure. When payment systems become fragile, trade becomes uncertain. Therefore, sanctions weaken energy trade even when political willingness exists.

The decline in Indian oil imports from Iran after 2018–2019 demonstrates the sanctions impact clearly. Iran had been a major supplier; after the expiry of waivers, Indian imports fell sharply and then largely stopped. India replaced Iranian crude with supplies from other countries, including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the United States, Russia and others. This showed India's adaptability, but it also reduced Iran's role in India's energy basket.

Sanctions also altered India's diplomatic balancing. India had to maintain relations with Iran while preserving its strategic relationship with the United States. It had to protect refinery interests while avoiding sanctions exposure. It had to explain to Iran that import reductions were driven by external financial constraints, not by hostility toward Iran. Such diplomacy required careful language and sustained communication. Sanctions therefore created not only economic difficulty but also diplomatic sensitivity.

7.3.1 U.S. Sanctions on Iran

U.S. sanctions on Iran have been rooted in multiple disputes: the nuclear programme, ballistic missiles, regional activities, terrorism-related designations, human rights concerns and the legacy of U.S.–Iran hostility after 1979. The sanctions regime expanded over time and became especially consequential for energy trade because oil exports are central to Iran's revenue. When sanctions target oil, they target the financial heart of the Iranian state. For India, these sanctions created direct complications because India had been one of Iran's major crude customers.

The most important feature of U.S. sanctions from India's perspective is their *secondary sanctions* character. Secondary sanctions threaten foreign companies, banks and institutions that do business with sanctioned Iranian entities, even if those actors are not American. This gives the sanctions global reach because most major banks and firms require access to the U.S. financial system and dollar-clearing networks. Therefore, U.S. sanctions influence the behaviour of countries far beyond U.S. territory. This is why India's energy trade with Iran became difficult even though India did not impose its own comparable sanctions.

After the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018, it reimposed sanctions targeting Iran's energy sector. Initially, some countries, including India, received *Significant Reduction Exceptions*, allowing limited purchases for a defined period. These waivers were temporary and designed

to reduce purchases progressively. When the waivers were not renewed in 2019, India's ability to continue oil imports from Iran became severely constrained. This was a decisive turning point in India–Iran energy trade.

The sanctions affected not only crude purchases but also shipping and insurance. Oil cargoes require tankers, marine insurance, protection-and-indemnity cover, port access and payment security. If any one of these elements becomes unavailable, trade becomes difficult. Sanctions therefore disrupt the entire commercial chain. Indian refiners had to evaluate not only price and crude quality but also legal risk, banking risk, insurance risk and diplomatic risk.

U.S. sanctions also complicated investment in Iranian energy projects. Indian firms could not easily invest in Iranian oil and gas fields or infrastructure without risking sanctions exposure. This reduced the possibility of upstream cooperation, which could have strengthened long-term energy security. Energy relationships become deeper when buyers invest in production assets; sanctions prevented such deepening.

At the diplomatic level, U.S. sanctions placed India in a difficult position. India values strategic partnership with the United States, but it also values energy security and relations with Iran. New Delhi had to communicate that its decisions were based on national interest and practical constraints rather than alignment against Iran. India's diplomacy therefore sought to preserve the relationship with Tehran even when oil imports fell.

Sanctions also exposed the vulnerability of global energy trade to financial power. A commodity may physically exist and a buyer may need it, but financial restrictions can prevent exchange. This is one of the defining features of contemporary geoeconomics. The Iran case demonstrates that twenty-first-century energy security depends not only on wells, pipelines and tankers, but also on banks, currencies, insurance systems and legal compliance.

In conclusion, U.S. sanctions on Iran profoundly affected India–Iran energy trade by restricting imports, discouraging investment, complicating payments and creating compliance risk. They transformed Iranian energy from a commercially attractive option into a politically sensitive transaction. For India, the challenge has been to protect strategic autonomy while managing the realities of global financial power.

7.3.2 Decline of Indian Oil Imports From Iran

The decline of Indian oil imports from Iran after 2018–2019 was one of the most visible consequences of sanctions. Before the tightening of sanctions, Iran had been among India's important crude suppliers. Iranian oil formed a meaningful part of India's West Asian energy basket. However, after the United States reimposed sanctions and ended temporary waivers, Indian refiners sharply reduced and then largely stopped regular imports from Iran. This marked a major contraction in one of the most important economic pillars of India–Iran relations.

The decline was not caused by the disappearance of Indian demand. India's demand for oil continued to grow. Nor was it caused by the disappearance of Iranian supply. Iran continued to possess abundant reserves and a desire to sell oil. The decline occurred because the transaction became constrained by sanctions, payment restrictions, insurance difficulties and diplomatic pressure. In other words, the market logic remained, but the geopolitical environment blocked the market.

The reduction began even before the final expiry of waivers. Indian refiners adjusted purchases to comply with sanctions-related expectations. Imports from Iran fell sharply in early 2019 compared with earlier levels. Iran's ranking among India's suppliers also declined. This showed that sanctions had a pre-emptive effect: companies reduced exposure before the legal risk became absolute. In global commerce, anticipation of sanctions can be almost as powerful as sanctions themselves.

After the waivers ended, India replaced Iranian crude with supplies from other countries. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the United States and later Russia became more important in India's crude basket. This substitution demonstrated India's capacity for diversification. However, substitution is not cost-free. Each crude grade has different properties, pricing, freight costs and refinery implications. Replacing Iranian crude required commercial adjustment. It also reduced India's bargaining options with suppliers.

The decline of imports also affected Iran. India had been a major Asian customer, and the loss of Indian purchases reduced Iran's market diversity. China remained a major buyer, often through more complex channels, but Iran's dependence on fewer buyers increased. This weakened Iran's

commercial flexibility. For Tehran, the decline of Indian imports was therefore not only an economic loss but also a diplomatic disappointment.

The decline also affected the political psychology of India–Iran relations. Iran expected India to show strategic autonomy and resist external pressure; India expected Iran to understand the practical risks faced by Indian companies and banks. This difference in expectation created tension. India's position was that energy trade had to be feasible within the global financial system. Iran's position was that friendly countries should not allow U.S. pressure to dictate relations. Managing this expectation gap became a major diplomatic task.

The decline of imports did not mean that India abandoned Iran. India continued engagement through Chabahar, diplomacy, cultural relations, consultations and regional dialogue. This distinction is important. Energy trade declined, but bilateral relations did not collapse. India tried to preserve the non-energy pillars of the relationship while waiting for a more favourable environment for energy cooperation. This is an example of *compartmentalized diplomacy*.

The decline also encouraged India to strengthen broader energy resilience. India diversified suppliers, increased attention to strategic petroleum reserves, expanded refining flexibility, developed ties with Russia and the United States, and continued engagement with Gulf producers. This was necessary because reliance on a sanctioned supplier can create uncertainty. The Iranian experience taught India that energy diversification must include not only different suppliers but also different political risk profiles.

However, the possibility of Iranian oil returning to India's import basket remains. If sanctions are eased, if waivers are granted, or if alternative payment and insurance mechanisms become viable, Indian refiners may reassess Iranian crude. Commercial logic can revive quickly when political constraints soften. Iran's proximity, reserves and past relationship with India ensure that the door remains open in principle.

In conclusion, the decline of Indian oil imports from Iran after 2018–2019 illustrates the power of sanctions to reshape energy trade. It reduced a major source of supply, forced India to diversify elsewhere, affected Iran's market position, and introduced diplomatic sensitivity. Yet it did not erase the structural complementarity between India and Iran. The decline was a product of geopolitical constraint, not natural economic irrelevance. Therefore,

Iranian oil remains a dormant but significant possibility in India's energy-security calculus.

Concluding Observation

Iran's role as an energy supplier for India is marked by both promise and constraint. Iranian oil offers supply diversification, refinery familiarity and geographical proximity. Iranian natural gas offers long-term potential for India's gas-based economy, fertilizer sector and cleaner industrial transition. Iran's energy resources make it structurally important for India's energy security. Yet U.S. sanctions have repeatedly interrupted this natural complementarity, causing a sharp decline in Indian oil imports and restricting investment in Iranian energy projects.

The India–Iran energy relationship therefore represents one of the clearest examples of *geoeconomics under geopolitical pressure*. Commercial logic pulls India and Iran together; sanctions and strategic alignments push them apart. India's challenge is to preserve energy optionality without exposing its companies and financial institutions to unacceptable risk. Iran's challenge is to remain a credible energy partner despite sanctions. In the long view of diplomacy, the energy relationship has not ended; it has entered a phase of constrained possibility.

7.3.3 Payment and Banking Challenges

Payment and banking challenges have been among the most intricate obstacles in India–Iran energy relations. Oil and gas trade is not completed merely when two governments agree or when two companies sign contracts. Modern energy trade requires a complicated architecture of *banking channels, currency settlement, letters of credit, insurance, shipping finance, compliance verification, escrow accounts, sovereign assurances and international clearing systems*. When sanctions strike this financial architecture, even mutually beneficial energy trade becomes exceedingly difficult. In the case of India and Iran, the payment question has often been more complicated than the supply question itself.

The central difficulty arises from the dominance of the United States dollar and Western-controlled financial networks in international energy trade. Crude oil is largely traded through dollar-denominated systems, and most major banks require access to dollar clearing, correspondent banking and international financial credibility. When sanctions threaten banks that process

Iranian payments, even non-American banks become cautious. This is the phenomenon of *financial deterrence*. It compels banks to avoid Iran-related transactions not merely because of domestic law, but because of fear of exclusion from the global financial system.

India faced precisely this difficulty in dealing with Iranian oil. Even when Indian refiners desired Iranian crude and Iran was ready to supply, banks hesitated to process payments. European banks became cautious; dollar payments became difficult; insurance and shipping channels became uncertain; and normal trade finance weakened. The result was the creation of alternative payment mechanisms, especially rupee-based arrangements. These mechanisms were innovative, but they also revealed the abnormality of sanctions-era trade.

The rupee-payment mechanism through Indian banks, particularly UCO Bank, represented a pragmatic response to sanctions pressure. Under such arrangements, Indian refiners deposited payments in rupee accounts, and Iran could use those funds for permitted imports from India, including items such as food products, medicines and other allowable goods. This mechanism helped maintain some trade when dollar and euro payments were constrained. It also supported Indian exports to Iran by allowing accumulated rupee balances to be spent within India. In this sense, the mechanism converted an energy-payment problem into a partial trade-balancing opportunity.

However, rupee payment was not a perfect solution. Iran's capacity to use rupee balances depended on the volume and nature of imports from India. If Iran accumulated more rupees than it could spend, the funds became trapped. Iran preferred convertible currency because it could be used globally; rupees had limited international utility. Thus, while India could make payments in rupees, Iran faced a problem of *currency usability*. This created dissatisfaction and reduced the attractiveness of such arrangements from Tehran's perspective.

Banking challenges also affected Indian exporters. If Indian exporters were to be paid from Iranian rupee balances, they needed confidence that the funds were available, transferable and not legally vulnerable. Any uncertainty in payment delayed trade. Small and medium exporters were especially cautious because sanctions compliance can be technically complex and financially risky. Therefore, banking difficulties did not affect only oil companies; they affected the broader bilateral commercial ecosystem.

Another difficulty was the reputational risk faced by banks. Even banks with limited exposure to the United States could become cautious because Iran-related transactions were closely watched. A bank involved in such transactions might face enhanced scrutiny from international partners, regulators and correspondent institutions. This created a chilling effect. In sanctions regimes, the fear of future penalties can be as powerful as actual penalties. Banking institutions often prefer over-compliance because the cost of violation is extremely high.

Payment problems also complicated long-term energy planning. Oil imports may be handled through temporary mechanisms, but large energy projects require investment, technology transfer, long-term financing and international partners. Gas fields, LNG facilities, pipelines and petrochemical projects cannot survive on fragile payment channels. They require stable banking and investor confidence. Therefore, payment and banking challenges prevented India–Iran energy cooperation from moving from simple purchase to deeper partnership.

The SWIFT system and international correspondent banking networks are particularly important in this context. If Iranian banks are restricted or viewed as high-risk, normal cross-border settlements become slow, expensive or impossible. Even when humanitarian or exempted trade is permitted, the banking pathway may remain obstructed. This gap between formal permission and practical bankability is one of the most serious problems in sanctions-era commerce. A transaction may be legally arguable but commercially unviable.

The payment challenge also affects India's strategic autonomy. India's ability to purchase energy according to national interest is constrained when banking channels are controlled by external sanction regimes. This does not mean that India can ignore sanctions; rather, it shows that modern sovereignty is affected by financial infrastructure. The Iran case demonstrates that twenty-first-century geopolitics is fought not only through armies and navies, but also through banks, currencies and compliance systems. This is *financial geopolitics*.

In diplomatic terms, payment challenges require constant negotiation. India must reassure Iran that payment difficulties are not a sign of political unwillingness, while Iran must understand the constraints faced by Indian banks and companies. Both sides must search for mechanisms that are lawful,

commercially workable and politically sustainable. Options may include rupee accounts, barter-like trade balancing, third-country banking, local-currency settlement, escrow structures, humanitarian-trade channels, and, under favourable conditions, limited dollar or euro settlements. Each mechanism has advantages and limitations.

In conclusion, payment and banking challenges have been a central constraint in India–Iran energy relations. They have transformed a natural energy partnership into a financially complicated arrangement. The issue is not merely whether India wants Iranian energy or Iran wants Indian markets; the issue is whether payments can move safely, legally and efficiently through the global financial system. Until banking channels become stable, India–Iran energy cooperation will remain vulnerable to interruption. In the refined vocabulary of geoeconomics, the payment problem is the *financial chokepoint* of India–Iran energy diplomacy.

7.4 Future of Energy Cooperation

The future of India–Iran energy cooperation will depend upon the interaction of five major factors: *sanctions relief*, *market competitiveness*, *payment feasibility*, *regional stability* and *strategic political will*. The structural logic of cooperation remains powerful. India is a large and growing energy consumer; Iran possesses vast oil and gas resources; the two countries are geographically proximate; and both have an interest in diversified energy partnerships. Yet structural logic alone is insufficient. It must be supported by favourable diplomatic and financial conditions.

The future energy relationship is likely to be cautious rather than sudden. India will not rush into dependence on Iranian supplies unless legal, banking and insurance conditions are stable. Iran, too, will need credible buyers, investment and technology. Both countries must move with prudence. The relationship may revive first through oil trade, because oil can be transported more flexibly than gas. Gas cooperation, especially pipelines, will remain more complicated. Renewable-energy cooperation may emerge as a newer and less politically sensitive domain.

Energy cooperation will also be influenced by India's broader energy transition. India is expanding renewable energy, green hydrogen, electric mobility and biofuels. However, hydrocarbons will remain important for many years. This means India's energy diplomacy must be *dual-track*: secure

oil and gas for present development while building clean-energy partnerships for the future. Iran can be relevant to both tracks if political conditions allow.

Iran, too, faces an energy transition challenge. It has massive hydrocarbon reserves but also large renewable potential, especially in solar and wind. Sanctions have limited investment in both conventional and renewable sectors. Cooperation with India in renewable technology, grid management, training, storage, solar manufacturing and energy efficiency could provide a less controversial area for future engagement. This would allow India–Iran energy cooperation to move beyond oil and gas.

The future must also be linked with Chabahar and connectivity. Chabahar can support trade in petroleum products, petrochemicals, equipment, renewable-energy components and industrial goods. Energy cooperation is stronger when it is connected with infrastructure and logistics. Therefore, the future of India–Iran energy relations should not be imagined only as crude-oil purchase; it should be framed as a wider *energy-connectivity partnership*.

7.4.1 Possibility of Oil Trade Revival

The revival of oil trade between India and Iran is possible, but it will depend on sanctions conditions, legal clarity, payment channels, insurance availability, refinery economics and political confidence. Iranian crude remains attractive in principle because of proximity, reserve strength, past commercial familiarity and potential pricing flexibility. Indian refiners are commercially sophisticated and regularly adjust crude purchases based on price, quality, freight and supply security. If Iranian crude becomes legally and financially accessible, Indian refiners may again consider it as part of their diversified crude basket.

The most important condition for revival is sanctions relief or a credible waiver framework. Oil trade cannot revive substantially if banks, insurers, shippers and refiners fear penalties. A temporary license or short-term waiver may permit limited transactions, but long-term revival requires predictability. Refiners cannot easily build procurement strategy around uncertain exemptions. Therefore, the durability of sanctions relief matters as much as its announcement.

Payment mechanisms will also determine revival. If payments can be made in dollars, euros or other convertible currencies through legitimate banking channels, trade can revive more smoothly. If only rupee settlement is

available, trade may revive but with limitations. Iran may accept rupees when it needs Indian goods or when alternatives are constrained, but it generally prefers usable foreign exchange. Therefore, an efficient payment solution is indispensable.

Insurance and shipping are equally important. Tankers require marine insurance, protection-and-indemnity cover, port clearance and compliance confidence. If insurers hesitate, oil cargoes become difficult. Even if crude is cheap, absence of insurance can make the trade unworkable. Thus, oil-trade revival requires the restoration of the entire commercial ecosystem: banks, insurers, shipping firms, ports, refiners and regulators.

Refinery economics will also matter. Indian refiners will compare Iranian crude with Russian, Iraqi, Saudi, UAE, U.S., African and Latin American grades. If Iranian crude is competitively priced and technically suitable, it will attract interest. If other supplies remain cheaper or easier to process, revival may be limited. Commercial logic cannot be ignored. Diplomatic goodwill can open the door, but price and quality decide volumes.

The revival of Iranian oil imports would strengthen India's energy diversification. It would add another supplier to India's crude basket and improve bargaining power with other producers. It could also reduce freight disadvantages compared with distant suppliers. For Iran, Indian purchases would diversify its customer base and reduce excessive dependence on fewer buyers. Thus, revival would benefit both sides.

However, India will likely proceed cautiously even if sanctions ease. New Delhi must consider relations with the United States, Gulf Arab states, Israel and other partners. India's foreign policy is based on multi-alignment, not exclusive commitment to any one supplier. Therefore, Iranian oil would be integrated into a diversified basket rather than treated as a dominant source. This would reduce political risk.

The revival of oil trade would also have diplomatic symbolism. It would signal that India and Iran can restore an important economic pillar when conditions permit. It would revive trust, increase commercial contact and give the bilateral relationship greater material weight. Energy trade often generates regular bureaucratic, corporate and ministerial interaction. Therefore, oil revival would strengthen the institutional rhythm of India–Iran relations.

Nevertheless, revival should not be romanticized. The global oil market is competitive, sanctions can return, regional tensions can escalate, and compliance requirements can shift rapidly. India must avoid overdependence and preserve flexibility. The correct policy is not to replace one dependency with another, but to expand optionality. Iranian oil should be viewed as one important component of India's *diversified energy sovereignty*.

In conclusion, the possibility of oil trade revival exists because the structural complementarity between India and Iran remains strong. India needs diversified crude supplies; Iran needs reliable markets. The barriers are political and financial, not geographical or commercial. If sanctions ease and payment systems stabilize, Iranian oil can again become a meaningful part of India's energy basket. Until then, it remains a significant but constrained option.

7.4.2 Gas Pipeline Debates

Gas pipeline debates have long occupied an important but difficult place in India–Iran energy relations. The most prominent example was the Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline, often described as a potential “peace pipeline.” Its logic was straightforward: Iran had abundant gas, Pakistan needed energy and transit revenue, and India required long-term gas supplies for industry, power, fertilizers and urban consumption. In theory, the pipeline could have created interdependence and regional stability. In practice, it became trapped in security concerns, pricing disputes, sanctions pressure and India–Pakistan mistrust.

The central problem for India was transit security. A pipeline passing through Pakistan would make India's energy supply dependent on the territory of a hostile neighbour. Given the history of wars, terrorism, border tensions and political distrust, this was an unacceptable vulnerability. Pipelines are fixed infrastructure; they cannot be rerouted quickly like tankers. If relations deteriorate, supply can be disrupted. This made the project strategically risky for India.

Pricing was another major issue. Long-term gas contracts require agreement on pricing formulae, escalation clauses, transit fees, take-or-pay obligations and supply guarantees. India had to ensure that imported pipeline gas would be commercially viable compared with LNG and other domestic or imported alternatives. If pricing was too high or uncertain, the project would not serve

India's energy interests. Energy security must include affordability, not merely availability.

Sanctions created another layer of difficulty. Investment in Iranian gas fields, pipeline infrastructure and cross-border financing would have exposed companies and banks to sanctions risk. Even if India, Iran and Pakistan agreed politically, the project would require technology, equipment, insurance, construction finance and international banking. Sanctions would complicate every stage. Therefore, the pipeline was not only a regional project; it was vulnerable to global financial pressure.

Security along the pipeline route also raised concerns. A pipeline passing through areas affected by militancy or instability would require continuous protection. Sabotage, political unrest or insurgent attacks could disrupt supply. The cost of securing the pipeline would be high, and liability questions would be complex. For India, dependence on such a vulnerable route did not appear prudent.

The pipeline debate also demonstrated the tension between regional idealism and strategic realism. Advocates argued that energy interdependence could improve India–Pakistan relations and promote peace. Critics argued that political hostility would make the pipeline hostage to conflict. In theory, interdependence can reduce conflict; in practice, interdependence with an adversary can create coercive vulnerability. India's cautious approach reflected this realism.

Alternative gas options have therefore gained attention. LNG imports avoid dependence on Pakistan transit because gas can be liquefied, shipped by sea and regasified in India. However, Iran's LNG development has been constrained by sanctions and lack of technology. Under favourable conditions, Iranian LNG could become more attractive than a Pakistan-transit pipeline. Offshore pipeline ideas have also occasionally been discussed, but they face technical, financial and strategic difficulties.

The debate over pipelines is still relevant because India's gas demand is expected to grow. If India aims to increase the share of gas in its energy mix, it must secure multiple sources. Iranian gas remains attractive because of reserve size and proximity. Yet the method of delivery matters. Pipeline gas through Pakistan is strategically difficult; LNG requires Iranian liquefaction capacity; offshore pipelines require major technological and financial

commitment. Thus, Iranian gas is a large opportunity surrounded by heavy constraints.

Gas cooperation could also take indirect forms. India and Iran could explore petrochemical cooperation, fertilizer projects, gas-based industrial production, investment in gas infrastructure, or swaps involving other regional actors. Such models may be easier than a direct pipeline in the short term. The future of gas cooperation may therefore be incremental rather than dramatic.

In conclusion, gas pipeline debates reveal both the promise and the difficulty of India–Iran energy cooperation. Iranian gas could support India’s long-term energy transition, fertilizer needs and industrial growth. Yet pipeline routes through Pakistan, sanctions, pricing, security and finance have prevented realization. The debate remains important because it shows that energy geography must always be interpreted through political geography. In India’s strategic calculus, a pipeline is not merely a tube carrying gas; it is a corridor of dependence, vulnerability and power.

7.4.3 Renewable Energy Cooperation

Renewable energy cooperation represents a promising future dimension of India–Iran relations. While oil and gas have historically dominated the energy relationship, the global energy transition requires both countries to explore cleaner, more sustainable and technologically modern forms of cooperation. India has become one of the world’s major renewable-energy markets, with ambitious solar, wind, green hydrogen and energy-efficiency goals. Iran, despite its hydrocarbon wealth, possesses significant solar and wind potential because of its geography, climate and land availability. This creates a new field of cooperation less burdened by the traditional politics of oil sanctions.

Renewable energy cooperation is attractive because it can diversify the energy relationship. India–Iran energy ties have often suffered from sanctions affecting oil, gas, banking and shipping. Renewable cooperation may face fewer constraints if structured around technology, training, research, decentralized solar applications, grid management, energy efficiency and academic collaboration. It can create a positive agenda even when hydrocarbon cooperation is difficult. This is the logic of *green diplomacy*.

Solar energy is a natural area of cooperation. Iran has large sunny regions and strong potential for solar generation. India has developed substantial

experience in solar deployment, manufacturing, policy design, auctions, grid integration and solar parks. Indian companies and institutions could, under favourable conditions, share expertise in solar project design, rooftop solar, agricultural solar pumps, mini-grids and solar training. Such cooperation would support Iran's diversification away from excessive hydrocarbon dependence.

Wind energy may also be relevant. Parts of Iran have wind resources that could be developed with appropriate technology and investment. India has experience in wind power development, especially in states such as Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Technical cooperation in wind mapping, turbine deployment, maintenance, training and grid integration could form part of future collaboration.

Green hydrogen is another emerging area. India has launched major initiatives for green hydrogen, and Iran's renewable potential plus existing energy infrastructure could make future cooperation possible. Green hydrogen remains expensive and technologically evolving, but long-term energy diplomacy must anticipate future opportunities. India and Iran could explore research cooperation, standards, pilot projects, ammonia, fertilizers and industrial decarbonization. Such cooperation would connect energy security with climate strategy.

Energy efficiency is perhaps the most practical immediate area. India has experience in large-scale LED distribution, appliance standards, industrial efficiency, smart metering and demand-side management. Iran, facing domestic energy-consumption pressures, could benefit from efficiency cooperation. Energy saved is energy supplied. Efficiency reduces domestic demand, frees hydrocarbons for export, lowers emissions and improves economic resilience. Therefore, efficiency cooperation could be mutually beneficial.

Renewable cooperation also has diplomatic value because it changes the narrative of India–Iran energy relations. Instead of being viewed only through oil, sanctions and nuclear controversy, the relationship can be framed through sustainability, technology, climate responsibility and development. This gives the partnership a more modern and constructive image. It aligns with global climate priorities and India's aspiration to be a leader in clean-energy transitions.

Academic and institutional cooperation can support this agenda. Universities, energy institutes, engineering colleges, research centres and public-sector agencies could collaborate on solar technology, storage, grid management, desert-energy systems, green hydrogen, energy policy and environmental studies. Such cooperation would be less politically sensitive than large hydrocarbon investments and could proceed even when commercial energy trade faces constraints.

Renewable energy cooperation can also connect with Chabahar. Solar power and clean-energy systems could support port operations, logistics parks, warehouses, desalination, cold chains and transport infrastructure. A greener Chabahar would symbolize the union of connectivity and sustainability. It would also show that India–Iran cooperation is not confined to old energy forms but can support future-oriented regional development.

However, renewable cooperation will also face constraints. Financing, sanctions compliance, technology transfer, domestic regulation, grid capacity and investment confidence will matter. Iran's energy subsidies and domestic market structure may reduce incentives for renewable investment. India's companies will require legal clarity and commercial security. Therefore, renewable cooperation must begin with modest, realistic and technically manageable projects.

In conclusion, renewable energy cooperation offers India and Iran a future-oriented pathway beyond the sanctions-prone hydrocarbon agenda. It can include solar, wind, green hydrogen, energy efficiency, academic cooperation and green infrastructure. While oil and gas will remain important, renewable cooperation can add a new layer of resilience and modernity. In the refined language of energy diplomacy, renewable cooperation can transform India–Iran relations from *hydrocarbon dependence* to *sustainable energy partnership*.

Concluding Observation

The future of India–Iran energy cooperation will depend upon whether the two countries can overcome the financial, political and logistical constraints that have weakened their natural complementarity. Payment and banking challenges remain the central obstacle because energy trade cannot flourish without secure settlement mechanisms. Oil trade revival is possible if sanctions relief, payment clarity, insurance and commercial competitiveness

align. Gas cooperation remains attractive but complicated by pipeline security, pricing, sanctions and infrastructure constraints. Renewable energy cooperation offers a promising new field that can modernize the energy relationship.

India and Iran possess strong structural reasons to cooperate. India needs diversified and secure energy access; Iran needs stable Asian markets, investment and technological engagement. Yet future cooperation must be built with *strategic patience*, *financial innovation*, *diplomatic balance* and *energy transition awareness*. The most durable India–Iran energy partnership will not be one-dimensional. It must include oil where feasible, gas where viable, renewables where possible, and connectivity where strategic. Such a partnership would convert energy from a vulnerable commodity relationship into a broader pillar of *geoeconomic resilience*.

Chapter 8:

Chabahar Port and India's Connectivity Strategy

Chabahar Port occupies a distinctive and almost irreplaceable position in India's connectivity strategy. It is not merely a maritime installation on Iran's south-eastern coast; it is a *geostrategic aperture*, a *continental gateway*, a *maritime-commercial instrument*, and a *diplomatic bridge* connecting India with Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the wider Eurasian landmass. In the vocabulary of contemporary geopolitics, Chabahar represents the transformation of geography into strategy. It allows India to use the sea not only for trade but also for continental access. It converts the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman into corridors of diplomacy, commerce and regional influence.

India's interest in Chabahar must be understood against the background of Pakistan's denial of direct land transit to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Since Partition, India's westward continental access has been constrained by the political geography of South Asia. Afghanistan and Central Asia are historically close to India through trade, culture, Buddhism, Sufism, Persianate civilization and strategic memory, but modern land routes have remained politically obstructed. Chabahar offers India an alternative. It enables Indian cargo to move by sea to Iran and then onward toward Afghanistan and Central Asia, thereby reducing dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes. This makes Chabahar a project of *strategic mobility* and *connectivity sovereignty*.

Chabahar also reflects the evolution of India–Iran relations from civilizational friendship to infrastructure-based partnership. Earlier chapters have shown that India and Iran share deep cultural and historical ties, but Chabahar adds a hard geopolitical dimension to this relationship. It gives physical expression to diplomatic intent. It links ports, roads, railways, customs systems, logistics platforms, border crossings and regional markets. In this sense, Chabahar transforms India–Iran relations from *memory-based affinity* into *corridor-based cooperation*.

The port is also significant because it connects India's maritime and continental strategies. India is a peninsular country with a strong maritime orientation, but its rise as a major Asian power requires access to continental Eurasia. Chabahar enables this fusion. Through it, India's western seaboard can connect with Iran's land routes, Afghanistan's interior and Central Asia's markets. Thus, Chabahar is the point where *sea power* becomes *land access*. In the theoretical language of Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* and Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History*, Chabahar allows India to combine maritime reach with continental penetration.

8.1 Introduction to Chabahar Port

Chabahar Port is situated on the south-eastern coast of Iran in the province of Sistan and Baluchestan, opening toward the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Its location gives it exceptional geopolitical importance because it lies outside the inner congestion of the Persian Gulf while remaining close to the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf region, Afghanistan and Central Asia. In strategic terms, Chabahar is a port of *access without entrapment*: it provides entry to Iran and beyond without requiring India to pass through Pakistan or become dependent on Persian Gulf inner-port vulnerabilities.

The name Chabahar itself carries an evocative cultural tone. Often interpreted through Persian linguistic roots as a place of "four springs" or pleasant seasons, it is located in a region where geography has always shaped history. The Makran coast, stretching across parts of Iran and Pakistan, has historically connected South Asia, Persia, Arabia and the wider Indian Ocean. Chabahar stands within this older maritime geography, but its contemporary importance arises from modern connectivity politics. It is a port where ancient coastal memory meets twenty-first-century geoeconomics.

For Iran, Chabahar has national-development and strategic value. It offers Tehran an opportunity to develop the less-developed Sistan and Baluchestan region, diversify maritime infrastructure, reduce overdependence on Persian Gulf ports, attract transit traffic and strengthen Iran's role as a corridor state. For India, it offers access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia. For Afghanistan, it provides an alternative outlet to the sea. For Central Asian republics, it offers another route to the Indian Ocean. Thus, Chabahar is not merely a bilateral India–Iran project; it is a *regional connectivity platform*.

Chabahar's importance increased particularly after the post-Cold War reorientation of Indian foreign policy. As India liberalized its economy, expanded trade, pursued energy security and sought access to Central Asia, connectivity became a central foreign-policy priority. India could no longer remain satisfied with symbolic relations; it needed routes, ports, corridors and logistics. Chabahar answered this need. It gave India a practical instrument for implementing its *Look West* and extended-neighbourhood strategies.

The port also acquired importance because of developments in Afghanistan. India has invested heavily in Afghanistan's development, including roads, dams, Parliament building, scholarships, medical aid and humanitarian assistance. However, Pakistan's refusal to provide normal transit access repeatedly complicated India's Afghan engagement. Chabahar provided a viable alternative. Through Chabahar, India could send goods and assistance to Afghanistan without relying on Pakistani territory. This gave the port a humanitarian and developmental dimension in addition to its geopolitical value.

Chabahar is also connected with the International North–South Transport Corridor. The INSTC aims to link India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through multimodal transport. Chabahar can act as one of the southern access points of this larger Eurasian connectivity architecture. When viewed together with INSTC, Chabahar is not an isolated port but a node in a larger network of *transcontinental logistics*. This gives it long-term strategic depth.

In the context of regional competition, Chabahar is often compared with Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which is associated with China–Pakistan connectivity. Such comparison must be handled carefully. Chabahar should not be reduced to a mere counter-Gwadar project, because its significance is broader and more constructive. Yet it is undeniable that Chabahar gives India strategic space in a region where China and Pakistan have expanded their infrastructure cooperation. Chabahar prevents India from being excluded from the north-western connectivity map.

In diplomatic language, Chabahar is a project of *inclusive connectivity*. It does not seek to dominate but to connect. It offers Afghanistan and Central Asia an additional route, Iran a developmental opportunity, and India a strategic opening. Its success depends upon infrastructure, sanctions management, regional stability, commercial viability and political will. But

its importance is already established because it addresses one of India's most persistent geographical problems: access to the west and north-west.

8.1.1 Location of Chabahar

The location of Chabahar is the foundation of its strategic importance. It is situated in south-eastern Iran, in Sistan and Baluchestan province, along the Gulf of Oman. This geographical position places it near the Arabian Sea and the western Indian Ocean, while also connecting it to Iran's internal routes toward Zahedan, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caspian region. The port's location is therefore not merely coastal; it is *corridor-forming*. It connects sea routes with land routes.

Chabahar's location on the Gulf of Oman gives it a special advantage. The Gulf of Oman links the Arabian Sea with the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. Ports on this coast have access to the broader Indian Ocean without being located deep inside the Persian Gulf. This matters because the Persian Gulf is a highly sensitive and congested energy zone, whereas the Gulf of Oman provides relatively more direct access to open seas. For India, this makes Chabahar a particularly valuable maritime entry point into Iran.

The geographical value of Chabahar also lies in its proximity to Afghanistan. From Chabahar, goods can move northward toward Zahedan and then toward the Iran–Afghanistan border. The connection with Afghanistan is crucial because Afghanistan is landlocked and historically dependent on Pakistani routes. Chabahar creates another outlet. It gives Afghanistan access to Indian goods and the Indian Ocean through Iran. For India, it creates access to Afghanistan without Pakistani transit. Thus, Chabahar's location has a dual function: it assists India and it diversifies Afghanistan's external trade options.

Chabahar also lies within reach of Central Asia. The Central Asian republics are landlocked and require external corridors to reach global markets. Through Iran's road and railway networks, Chabahar can potentially connect with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and beyond. This makes the port a *southern maritime gateway* for Central Asia. For India, this is extremely important because Central Asia is rich in energy, minerals, uranium, agricultural products and strategic possibilities.

The location of Chabahar must also be understood in relation to Pakistan. Pakistan lies between India and Afghanistan, blocking India's direct land

access to the north-west. Chabahar allows India to bypass this blockage. Indian goods can travel by sea to Chabahar and then proceed overland to Afghanistan and Central Asia. This is why Chabahar is frequently described as a project of *bypassing Pakistan*, though in more diplomatic terms it may be called a project of *alternative access*. It creates options without requiring confrontation.

The location also connects with India's western maritime geography. Indian ports such as Kandla, Mundra, Mumbai and Nhava Sheva can connect by sea with Chabahar. This makes Chabahar a natural extension of India's western seaboard strategy. The Arabian Sea becomes the maritime bridge; Iran becomes the land bridge; Afghanistan and Central Asia become the continental destinations. Thus, Chabahar links India's coast with Eurasia's interior.

Chabahar's location near but outside the inner Persian Gulf also gives it strategic resilience. The Strait of Hormuz remains one of the world's most sensitive energy chokepoints. Chabahar's position on the Gulf of Oman gives it access to the Arabian Sea without requiring entry deep into the Persian Gulf. This does not eliminate all regional risks, but it does provide a comparatively advantageous maritime position. In a region of recurring tension, such geographical positioning matters greatly.

The Makran coast, where Chabahar is located, has historically been a difficult but important frontier. It is arid, rugged and underdeveloped in many stretches, yet it possesses immense strategic value because it faces the Arabian Sea and lies near South Asia, Iran and the Gulf. Ports on the Makran coast can shape regional maritime competition and connectivity. Chabahar is therefore part of a wider coastal geopolitics that includes energy routes, naval movement, trade corridors and infrastructure rivalries.

In conclusion, the location of Chabahar gives it exceptional importance for India. It sits on Iran's Gulf of Oman coast, connects with the Arabian Sea, provides access to Afghanistan, opens possibilities toward Central Asia, bypasses Pakistan-controlled routes and links maritime India with continental Eurasia. Its location is its destiny. In the refined vocabulary of geopolitics, Chabahar is the *geographical keyhole through which India looks toward Central Asia and Eurasia*.

8.1.2 Shahid Beheshti Terminal

The Shahid Beheshti Terminal is the principal focus of India's operational engagement at Chabahar Port. It represents the concrete institutional expression of India–Iran connectivity cooperation. While Chabahar as a port has broad geographical and strategic importance, the Shahid Beheshti Terminal is the specific site where India's role becomes visible through equipment, operation, contractual arrangements, cargo handling and logistical planning. It is, therefore, the *operational nucleus* of India's Chabahar policy.

The terminal is named after Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, a major figure of the Iranian Revolution and early Islamic Republic. The naming itself reflects Iran's revolutionary historical memory, while India's participation in the terminal reflects the pragmatic depth of India–Iran relations. This combination is notable: a terminal named within Iran's revolutionary vocabulary becomes the site of India's strategic connectivity. It illustrates how ideology and pragmatism can coexist in international relations when geography creates mutual interest.

India's involvement in Shahid Beheshti Terminal has developed through a long diplomatic process. India and Iran signed understandings to cooperate on Chabahar's development, and the 2016 Trilateral Agreement among India, Iran and Afghanistan provided the broader regional framework. The 2024 long-term main contract between India Ports Global Limited and Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization gave greater durability to India's operational role. This long-term arrangement is significant because port development requires continuity, investment security and administrative predictability. Short-term arrangements cannot produce large strategic confidence; long-term engagement can.

The terminal is important because it enables cargo handling for commercial and humanitarian purposes. India's vision is not merely to build a symbolic presence, but to create a functioning gateway. Equipment such as cranes, handling machinery, terminal systems and logistics arrangements are vital because port diplomacy cannot succeed without operational efficiency. A port becomes strategic only when ships dock, containers move, paperwork clears, roads function, cargo reaches destinations and traders trust the route.

The Shahid Beheshti Terminal also plays a role in India's Afghanistan policy. Through this terminal, India can send goods toward Afghanistan by using Iran's internal transport network. This is especially important for humanitarian cargo, food supplies, medicines, development material and commercial goods. When Pakistan denies or disrupts transit, Chabahar becomes more valuable. The terminal therefore supports not only trade but also India's reputation as a developmental and humanitarian partner.

For Iran, the terminal supports regional development. Sistan and Baluchestan is one of Iran's less-developed provinces, and Chabahar's growth can contribute to employment, infrastructure, trade, logistics and industrial activity. Iran benefits when Chabahar becomes a regional transit hub. India's role therefore supports Iran's domestic developmental objective as well. This makes the project mutually beneficial rather than one-sided.

The terminal also has significance in relation to the International North–South Transport Corridor. If Chabahar is effectively connected with Iran's inland road and railway network, the Shahid Beheshti Terminal can become a southern maritime node in the larger Eurasian corridor. Cargo from India can enter Chabahar and move northward toward the Caspian region, Russia and Europe. This would increase the terminal's importance from regional to transcontinental level.

The Shahid Beheshti Terminal also demonstrates the importance of *port-led diplomacy*. In earlier centuries, ports were sites of trade, empire and cultural exchange. In the twenty-first century, ports remain instruments of influence. They shape supply chains, logistics networks, maritime access and political leverage. India's engagement at Shahid Beheshti Terminal shows that Indian diplomacy increasingly understands infrastructure as strategy. Roads, ports and corridors are now instruments of foreign policy.

However, the terminal has faced challenges. Sanctions on Iran have slowed investment, complicated banking and insurance, and created hesitation among private actors. Infrastructure connectivity from the port to inland routes also requires sustained development. Afghanistan's political instability has affected transit prospects. Commercial volume must grow for the terminal to become fully viable. Thus, the Shahid Beheshti Terminal is strategically important, but its success depends upon persistent implementation.

India must therefore approach the terminal with *strategic patience*. It should not judge Chabahar only by immediate cargo volumes. Major connectivity projects take time, especially in sanction-affected and politically complex regions. The long-term value of Shahid Beheshti lies in the access it creates, the options it preserves, and the regional architecture it supports. Even limited operational success can have strategic meaning if it keeps the corridor alive.

In conclusion, the Shahid Beheshti Terminal is the heart of India's Chabahar engagement. It is the place where policy becomes infrastructure, where diplomacy becomes cargo movement, and where India–Iran cooperation acquires tangible form. It is not only a terminal; it is an *instrument of strategic access*, an *institutional anchor of connectivity*, and a *gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia*.

8.1.3 Strategic Importance for India

The strategic importance of Chabahar for India is immense and multidimensional. It is important for access to Afghanistan, outreach to Central Asia, engagement with Iran, competition with China–Pakistan connectivity, energy security, humanitarian diplomacy, Eurasian trade, and India's larger ambition to become a major Asian power. No single phrase can capture its significance. Chabahar is simultaneously a *port*, a *corridor*, a *bypass*, a *gateway*, a *strategic signal* and a *geo-economic instrument*.

The first strategic importance of Chabahar is that it allows India to bypass Pakistan. Pakistan's refusal to provide India normal overland access to Afghanistan and Central Asia has long limited India's continental strategy. Chabahar offers India an alternative route. Indian cargo can move by sea to Iran and then overland toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. This reduces India's vulnerability to Pakistan's transit denial. In strategic language, Chabahar gives India *route autonomy*.

The second importance is Afghanistan. India has deep interests in a stable, sovereign and plural Afghanistan. It has invested in Afghan development and provided humanitarian assistance. Yet without access, India's role becomes constrained. Chabahar helps India reach Afghanistan through Iran. It gives Afghanistan another outlet to the sea and reduces its dependence on Pakistan. Thus, Chabahar strengthens both India's Afghan policy and Afghanistan's economic sovereignty.

The third importance is Central Asia. India's engagement with Central Asian republics has long suffered because of poor connectivity. These republics are rich in energy, uranium, minerals and strategic location, but India's trade with them remains below potential. Chabahar can help change this by opening a southern route through Iran. If connected with road and rail networks, it can link India with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Thus, Chabahar supports India's *Connect Central Asia* approach.

The fourth importance is Eurasian access. Through its connection with the International North–South Transport Corridor, Chabahar can support India's access to Russia, the Caspian region and Europe. This gives India an alternative to traditional routes and helps diversify supply chains. In an era of geopolitical disruption, supply-chain resilience is itself strategic power. Chabahar contributes to that resilience.

The fifth importance is its relationship with Iran. Chabahar gives India–Iran relations a concrete strategic pillar. Cultural relations are important, but infrastructure creates durable interdependence. Through Chabahar, India and Iran cooperate in ports, logistics, transport, customs, trade and regional connectivity. This deepens the relationship beyond symbolism. It gives both countries a shared project with long-term implications.

The sixth importance is regional balance. China's presence in Pakistan through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwadar Port has altered the connectivity map of the Arabian Sea and western South Asia. Chabahar gives India a strategic presence in the same broader maritime region. It should not be presented crudely as a rival port, but it certainly prevents India from being absent in a region where China and Pakistan have strengthened cooperation. Chabahar is India's answer to *connectivity exclusion*.

The seventh importance is humanitarian diplomacy. Chabahar can be used to send food, medicines and assistance to Afghanistan and possibly other regional destinations. This gives India a humanitarian corridor that is not dependent on Pakistan. In times of crisis, access routes can save lives and enhance diplomatic goodwill. Therefore, Chabahar is not only a strategic project; it is also a humanitarian instrument.

The eighth importance is maritime strategy. Chabahar connects India's western seaboard with the Gulf of Oman. It gives India a maritime link with

Iran and a platform near important sea lanes. While India's role at Chabahar is commercial and developmental, the broader maritime significance cannot be ignored. Ports shape influence, and influence shapes regional order. Chabahar strengthens India's presence in the western Indian Ocean's strategic imagination.

The ninth importance is energy and trade. Iran and Central Asia are energy-rich spaces. Chabahar can support future movement of commodities, petrochemicals, fertilizers, minerals and industrial goods. Although the port is not primarily an energy terminal for India, it contributes to the wider infrastructure of energy and trade diversification. A country with more routes has more bargaining power.

The tenth importance is strategic autonomy. Chabahar gives India independent options. It allows India to engage Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia without depending on Pakistan. It gives India a route outside Chinese-controlled or Pakistan-influenced corridors. It gives India a platform even when regional politics are difficult. Such options are the essence of strategic autonomy. Chabahar is therefore not merely a physical asset; it is a diplomatic option preserved in concrete.

Yet India must also recognize the challenges. U.S. sanctions on Iran, banking restrictions, insurance difficulties, regional instability, Afghanistan's uncertain politics, Iran's domestic constraints and infrastructure delays all affect Chabahar's implementation. The project requires patience, institutional coordination, financial innovation and diplomatic balancing. India must sustain commitment without unrealistic expectations. Chabahar is a long-term strategic investment, not an instant commercial miracle.

In conclusion, Chabahar's strategic importance for India lies in its ability to alter the geography of Indian foreign policy. It reduces Pakistan's transit leverage, opens Afghanistan and Central Asia, strengthens India-Iran relations, supports Eurasian connectivity, gives India a western maritime foothold, and reinforces strategic autonomy. In the highest language of geopolitics, Chabahar is the *western portal of India's continental aspiration* and the *maritime key to India's Eurasian engagement*.

Concluding Observation

Chabahar Port is one of the most important instruments of India's connectivity strategy in the twenty-first century. Its location on Iran's Gulf of

Oman coast gives India direct maritime access to Iran and onward routes toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Shahid Beheshti Terminal provides the operational basis for India's engagement. The strategic importance of Chabahar lies in its capacity to bypass Pakistan, support Afghanistan, connect Central Asia, integrate with INSTC, strengthen India–Iran ties and enhance India's strategic autonomy.

The port is also a symbol of a larger diplomatic transformation. India–Iran relations are no longer based only on shared history and culture; they are now connected through infrastructure, trade, transit and regional strategy. Chabahar converts *civilizational memory* into *geopolitical utility*. It is not simply a port in Iran; it is a strategic idea in Indian foreign policy. Its success will depend on sustained political will, regional stability and operational efficiency, but its significance has already been established in the geography of India's westward strategy.

8.2 Chabahar as an Alternative to Pakistan Route

Chabahar Port has acquired extraordinary importance in India's connectivity strategy because it offers a practical, sovereign and diplomatically viable alternative to the Pakistan route. Since Partition, India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia has been structurally obstructed by Pakistan's geographical position and political unwillingness to permit normal Indian overland transit. This has produced a serious *geopolitical blockage* in India's westward strategy. Chabahar helps India answer this problem not through confrontation, but through *alternative access*, *corridor diversification* and *geo-economic statecraft*. It allows India to move goods by sea to Iran and then onward through Iranian and Afghan territory toward Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The significance of Chabahar lies in the fact that it changes the grammar of India's continental connectivity. Without Chabahar, India's access to Afghanistan depends either on air routes, expensive indirect movement, or Pakistan's political consent. With Chabahar, India gains a maritime-land corridor through Iran. This gives India what may be called *route sovereignty*. A country that possesses route sovereignty is not compelled to place its strategic outreach at the mercy of an adversarial transit state. Therefore, Chabahar is not merely a port; it is an instrument through which India seeks to overcome the *cartographic consequences of Partition*.

Chabahar also serves Afghanistan's interest. Afghanistan is a landlocked country whose access to world markets has long been dependent on Pakistan's ports and border crossings. This dependence has often given Pakistan political and economic leverage over Afghan trade. Chabahar offers Afghanistan an alternative outlet to the sea through Iran. Such diversification strengthens Afghanistan's economic independence and reduces the vulnerability created by recurring Pakistan–Afghanistan border closures. Therefore, Chabahar is not only an Indian project; it is also an Afghan economic-security opportunity.

For Iran, Chabahar strengthens its role as a *transit civilization* and *corridor state*. Iran's geography allows it to connect the Indian Ocean with Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian region and Eurasia. By developing Chabahar, Iran can increase trade, attract transit traffic, develop Sistan and Baluchestan, and strengthen its diplomatic value for India, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Thus, the port creates a threefold advantage: India obtains access, Afghanistan obtains an alternative trade route, and Iran obtains transit relevance.

Chabahar's alternative-route function also has broader geopolitical meaning. China–Pakistan connectivity, especially through Gwadar and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, has altered the strategic geography of the Arabian Sea. India's involvement in Chabahar gives it a connectivity presence in the same wider maritime region, though Chabahar should not be described merely as a counter-port. Its deeper purpose is constructive: to facilitate trade, humanitarian supplies and regional access. Yet it certainly prevents India from being excluded from the north-western connectivity map. In this sense, Chabahar is a response to *connectivity marginalization*.

The alternative-route value of Chabahar must also be seen in relation to the International North–South Transport Corridor and India's Central Asian outreach. Once linked effectively with Iranian road and rail networks, Chabahar can connect Indian ports with Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. This gives India a wider Eurasian option. The port therefore functions simultaneously as an Afghan corridor and a Eurasian corridor. Its importance increases as India seeks diversified supply chains, alternative routes and greater strategic autonomy.

However, Chabahar's role as an alternative to the Pakistan route faces several obstacles. Sanctions on Iran complicate investment, banking, insurance and

shipping. Afghanistan's internal instability affects cargo movement. Infrastructure gaps between Chabahar, Zahedan, Zaranj, Delaram and onward Central Asian routes require sustained development. Commercial cargo volumes must grow for the route to become economically self-sustaining. Therefore, Chabahar is strategically indispensable but operationally demanding. It requires *strategic patience*, *diplomatic perseverance* and *institutional continuity*.

In conclusion, Chabahar is India's most significant alternative to the Pakistan route because it transforms a blocked continental geography into a navigable geopolitical corridor. It helps India bypass Pakistan's transit denial, assists Afghanistan's trade diversification, strengthens Iran's corridor role, and opens possibilities toward Central Asia and Eurasia. In the high language of geopolitics, Chabahar is the *western key to India's landlocked aspirations*.

8.2.1 India's Access Problem Through Pakistan

India's access problem through Pakistan is one of the most enduring structural limitations in Indian foreign policy. Before 1947, the Indian subcontinent was historically connected with Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia through north-western routes. Merchants, scholars, saints, soldiers and travellers moved across these spaces for centuries. The cultural memories of Gandhara, Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Bukhara and Samarkand were deeply connected with India's historical imagination. Partition transformed this older civilizational continuity into a fragmented geopolitical reality. Pakistan emerged between India and the north-western routes, thereby creating a *strategic rupture* in India's access to continental Asia.

The problem is not merely physical distance. India is not extremely far from Afghanistan or Central Asia; rather, its access is obstructed by political geography. Pakistan's refusal to provide India normal overland transit to Afghanistan and Central Asia has converted geographical proximity into strategic difficulty. This is the essence of *politicized geography*. The route exists on the map, but it is unavailable in practice because of hostile state behaviour. Thus, India's challenge is not only geographical; it is diplomatic, political and strategic.

Pakistan's transit denial has affected India's trade with Afghanistan. Indian goods such as pharmaceuticals, food items, textiles, machinery, tea, medical supplies and construction materials have strong demand in Afghanistan, but

the absence of normal land access increases cost and reduces competitiveness. Air corridors can help, but they cannot replace large-scale land and sea-based trade. Humanitarian assistance also becomes more difficult when land routes are blocked or politicized. Therefore, Pakistan's denial of transit has humanitarian consequences as well as commercial consequences.

The access problem also limits India's engagement with Central Asia. Central Asia is rich in energy, minerals, uranium, agricultural products and strategic location. India has historical and cultural connections with the region, but trade volumes have remained below potential because of weak connectivity. Without Pakistan's cooperation, India cannot use the shortest overland route. This forces India to seek alternatives through Iran, the Caspian region, air cargo or other indirect corridors. Chabahar is therefore a strategic necessity rather than a diplomatic luxury.

Pakistan's access denial also creates a strategic asymmetry. Pakistan can trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia through land routes, while India is constrained. Pakistan can use its geography as leverage over Afghanistan, especially during periods of political tension. India, by contrast, must depend on longer, costlier and more complex routes. Chabahar reduces this asymmetry by creating an alternative route through Iran. It gives India an instrument to overcome Pakistan's *geographical veto*.

The India–Pakistan relationship has also been marked by wars, cross-border terrorism, border tensions and deep political distrust. In such an environment, it would be imprudent for India to base its Afghan or Central Asian strategy on Pakistani cooperation alone. Strategic planning requires reliable routes. A route controlled by an adversarial state is not reliable. Therefore, India's search for Chabahar is grounded in realistic strategic calculation.

This access problem also affects India's regional image. A major power must be able to deliver goods, assistance and investments to its partners. If India cannot physically reach Afghanistan and Central Asia, its diplomatic promises lose operational strength. Chabahar gives India credibility because it provides a physical route. In foreign policy, credibility often travels through roads, ports and cargo ships.

The access problem through Pakistan has become sharper because of China–Pakistan connectivity. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor strengthens

Pakistan's position in regional infrastructure politics and gives China direct access to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar. If India remained without an alternative western route, it would risk being strategically encircled or marginalized. Chabahar helps India resist such marginalization by creating an independent corridor.

In conclusion, India's access problem through Pakistan is a central reason for Chabahar's strategic importance. Pakistan's denial of land transit has obstructed India's natural westward connections to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Chabahar provides a sovereign alternative. It allows India to turn the sea into a bridge and Iran into a corridor. In the refined vocabulary of strategy, Chabahar is India's answer to the *geopolitical imprisonment of westward access*.

8.2.2 Chabahar–Afghanistan Route

The Chabahar–Afghanistan route is one of the most important dimensions of India's connectivity strategy. It links Indian ports with Chabahar in Iran and then connects onward through Iranian territory toward Afghanistan. This route is significant because it provides India with access to Afghanistan without depending on Pakistan. It also provides Afghanistan with an alternative outlet to the sea. Thus, the Chabahar–Afghanistan route is a corridor of *mutual strategic relief*: it relieves India from Pakistan's transit denial and Afghanistan from Pakistan's excessive transit dependence.

The route's strategic logic is simple but powerful. Indian cargo travels by sea to Chabahar Port on Iran's Gulf of Oman coast. From Chabahar, goods can move northward through Iran toward Zahedan and then toward the Afghanistan border. On the Afghan side, routes such as Zaranj–Delaram connect to Afghanistan's internal road network. India's earlier role in building the Zaranj–Delaram road gave additional strategic value to the Chabahar corridor because it linked the Iranian border with Afghanistan's ring-road system. In this way, Indian infrastructure diplomacy in Afghanistan and port diplomacy in Iran became mutually reinforcing.

The Chabahar–Afghanistan route has a strong humanitarian significance. Afghanistan has repeatedly faced food insecurity, political instability, war, drought, economic collapse and humanitarian distress. India has long provided assistance to the Afghan people, including wheat, medicines and other essential supplies. Chabahar provides a route for such assistance when

Pakistan-controlled routes are unavailable or politically restricted. A corridor that carries food and medicine is not merely strategic; it is morally significant. It becomes a *humanitarian artery*.

The route also supports Afghanistan's economic sovereignty. A landlocked country becomes vulnerable when it depends too heavily on one transit country. Pakistan's ports and border crossings have often been essential for Afghan trade, but political tensions and closures have disrupted commerce. Chabahar gives Afghanistan an additional option. Diversified routes reduce coercive vulnerability. Therefore, the Chabahar–Afghanistan route strengthens Afghanistan's bargaining power and economic resilience.

For India, the route enhances its developmental role in Afghanistan. India has invested in Afghan infrastructure, education, health, capacity building and public institutions. However, development assistance requires delivery mechanisms. Chabahar makes delivery more feasible. It allows India to send goods, machinery, humanitarian aid and commercial cargo. Thus, the route gives logistical substance to India's Afghan goodwill.

The route also carries diplomatic symbolism. It demonstrates that India, Iran and Afghanistan can cooperate in spite of regional obstacles. It shows that connectivity can be created through partnership rather than coercion. The trilateral framework around Chabahar reflects this idea. It represents a model of regional cooperation based on mutual benefit, respect for sovereignty and shared developmental interest.

The route is also important for trade. Afghan products such as dry fruits, saffron, carpets, medicinal plants, fresh fruits and agricultural goods can reach India more reliably through Chabahar. Similarly, Indian goods such as pharmaceuticals, tea, rice, machinery, textiles and medical supplies can reach Afghan markets. A functioning trade route can create business confidence, reduce delays and strengthen people-to-people economic links.

However, the Chabahar–Afghanistan route faces challenges. Afghanistan's political uncertainty after the Taliban's return to power has created diplomatic complexity. International recognition issues, sanctions-related concerns, security risks and administrative uncertainty affect trade. Iran's own sanctions environment complicates banking and insurance. The route also requires efficient customs, warehousing, road maintenance, cargo handling

and coordination among multiple agencies. These obstacles are real, but they do not diminish the route's strategic logic.

The Chabahar–Afghanistan route should therefore be viewed as a long-term strategic investment. Its importance lies not only in current cargo volume but in the option it preserves. In geopolitics, options have value even when they are not used at full capacity. Chabahar gives India and Afghanistan an option beyond Pakistan. That option itself changes the regional bargaining structure.

In conclusion, the Chabahar–Afghanistan route is a corridor of access, assistance and autonomy. It enables India to reach Afghanistan, gives Afghanistan an alternative maritime outlet, strengthens India–Iran cooperation and weakens the monopolistic influence of Pakistan-controlled routes. In the language of diplomatic geography, it is the *corridor through which India's Afghan policy acquires physical form*.

8.2.3 Chabahar–Central Asia Route

The Chabahar–Central Asia route represents the broader and more ambitious dimension of India's connectivity strategy. While the Chabahar–Afghanistan route addresses immediate access to Afghanistan, the Chabahar–Central Asia route opens the possibility of India's engagement with the Eurasian heartland. Central Asia has long been important for India because of its energy resources, minerals, uranium, strategic location, cultural connections and role in regional security. Yet India's access to Central Asia has remained limited because of Pakistan's transit denial and Afghanistan's instability. Chabahar offers an alternative.

The route from Chabahar to Central Asia depends on Iran's internal road and railway networks, including connections toward Zahedan, Mashhad, Sarakhs, the Caspian region and border points with Turkmenistan and other Central Asian states. Through these routes, Indian goods can potentially move from Indian ports to Chabahar and then onward to Central Asian markets. Central Asian goods can move southward toward Chabahar and then to India and the wider Indian Ocean. This creates a *north-south trade imagination* that complements older east-west Silk Route memories.

The importance of this route is heightened by the landlocked nature of Central Asian republics. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan all require access to external corridors for trade. Dependence on limited routes reduces their strategic autonomy. Chabahar gives them a

possible southern outlet to the sea. For countries seeking multi-vector diplomacy, such route diversification is valuable. India can offer itself as a major market and maritime partner through Iran.

The Chabahar–Central Asia route also connects with the International North–South Transport Corridor. INSTC is designed to link India, Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through multimodal transport. Chabahar can become one of the southern maritime nodes of this larger corridor. If successfully operationalized, it can reduce transit time, diversify supply chains and enhance India's trade with Eurasia. This makes the route not merely regional but transcontinental.

For India, Central Asia is important for energy. Turkmenistan has major gas reserves; Kazakhstan has oil and uranium; Uzbekistan has energy and minerals; Tajikistan has hydropower potential and strategic location; Kyrgyzstan connects with broader Central Asian networks. India's energy security and resource diplomacy can benefit from better connectivity with these states. Chabahar creates the possibility of more credible engagement.

The route also has security significance. India and Central Asian states share concerns regarding terrorism, extremism, narcotics trafficking and instability emanating from Afghanistan. Better connectivity can support not only trade but also diplomatic coordination, humanitarian logistics, capacity building and regional development. Iran's role is crucial because it connects Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Chabahar's Central Asian significance also lies in competition with other connectivity projects. China's Belt and Road Initiative has created deep infrastructure links across Central Asia. Russia retains historical networks. Turkey promotes trans-Caspian and Turkic connectivity. Iran seeks to become a corridor state. India must participate in this competitive connectivity environment or risk marginalization. Chabahar gives India a practical point of entry.

The route also revives historical Indo-Central Asian linkages. For centuries, India was connected with Central Asia through trade, religion, language and culture. Persianate civilization, Sufi networks, Buddhist transmission, textiles, horses, spices and scholarship moved across these regions. Modern borders and rivalries interrupted these flows. Chabahar offers the possibility

of restoring older relationships in a contemporary form. It represents the modern rebirth of *trans-Asian connectivity*.

Yet the Chabahar–Central Asia route faces serious challenges. Infrastructure connectivity must be completed and modernized. Customs procedures must be simplified. Cargo volumes must be economically viable. Sanctions on Iran complicate financing and private-sector participation. Afghanistan's instability affects route security. Central Asian states may be cautious due to their relations with Russia, China and other powers. Therefore, India must pursue the route with patience and institutional seriousness.

In conclusion, the Chabahar–Central Asia route is central to India's Eurasian strategy. It offers India access to resource-rich, strategically located and historically connected Central Asian republics. It gives Central Asia a possible route to the Indian Ocean. It strengthens Iran's role as a corridor state. It links with INSTC and India's wider Eurasian ambition. In the language of grand strategy, Chabahar is the *southern gateway through which India seeks re-entry into the Central Asian heartland*.

8.3 Chabahar and Afghanistan

Chabahar's relationship with Afghanistan is one of the most important aspects of its strategic value. Afghanistan is a landlocked state whose economic and political stability depends heavily on access to external markets. For decades, Afghanistan's trade routes have been vulnerable to political tensions, border closures and dependence on Pakistan. Chabahar offers Afghanistan an alternative route through Iran to the sea. This makes the port significant not only for India and Iran but also for Afghanistan's economic sovereignty and regional integration.

India's Afghanistan policy has consistently emphasized development, humanitarian assistance, infrastructure, education, health and capacity building. Chabahar gives this policy a logistical foundation. It allows India to deliver goods and assistance without relying on Pakistan. In this sense, Chabahar is the material infrastructure behind India's Afghan goodwill. A foreign policy of assistance requires a route; Chabahar supplies that route.

For Afghanistan, Chabahar represents diversification. Landlocked countries often suffer from dependence on neighbours for transit. Such dependence can be converted into political pressure. When Afghanistan has access to

Chabahar, it reduces the monopoly of Pakistan-linked routes. This creates greater bargaining space and economic resilience. The port therefore has a direct connection with Afghanistan's sovereignty.

Chabahar also integrates Afghanistan with wider regional trade. Through Chabahar, Afghan goods can move to India and other markets. Indian goods can move to Afghanistan and potentially beyond. Iran benefits as a transit country. The result is a triangular pattern of cooperation. India provides market and goods, Iran provides route and port, Afghanistan provides destination and transit potential. This triangularity is the heart of Chabahar's regional meaning.

Afghanistan also gives Chabahar moral significance. The port is not only about strategic competition or commercial gain; it has been used to send humanitarian assistance. Such usage gives Chabahar legitimacy as a development corridor. In a region often associated with rivalry, war and sanctions, Chabahar can be presented as an instrument of constructive regionalism.

However, Afghanistan's instability remains a major challenge. Political uncertainty, security risks, lack of international recognition of the Taliban regime, financial restrictions and administrative limitations affect the movement of goods. India must balance humanitarian engagement with diplomatic caution. Iran must manage its border and relations with Afghan authorities. Afghanistan must improve internal logistics and customs systems. Chabahar's success is therefore linked to Afghanistan's internal governance and regional diplomacy.

Despite these challenges, Chabahar remains one of the best available options for Afghanistan's external connectivity. It provides access to the Indian Ocean through Iran and links Afghanistan with India's large market. It also reduces dependence on any single transit state. Therefore, Chabahar and Afghanistan are strategically inseparable.

8.3.1 Humanitarian Supplies

Humanitarian supplies are one of the most important uses of the Chabahar route. Afghanistan has faced repeated humanitarian crises caused by war, drought, economic collapse, displacement, food insecurity and political instability. India has provided assistance to the Afghan people over many years, including food, medicines, medical support, educational assistance and

development aid. Chabahar allows such assistance to be delivered through a route that does not depend on Pakistan's consent.

The shipment of wheat through Chabahar demonstrated the port's humanitarian utility. Wheat is not merely a commodity in this context; it is a symbol of food security and regional responsibility. When a country sends wheat to a crisis-affected society, it supports survival, stability and goodwill. Chabahar made it possible for India to use maritime and Iranian land routes to support Afghanistan. This showed that the port could function as a *humanitarian corridor*.

Humanitarian assistance through Chabahar has several advantages. It reduces dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes, which may be closed or politicized. It strengthens India's ability to respond to Afghan needs. It gives Iran a constructive role in regional assistance. It provides Afghanistan with diversified access. It also demonstrates that connectivity projects can serve moral and developmental purposes, not only strategic competition.

The humanitarian role of Chabahar also enhances India's image. India has often been viewed favourably in Afghanistan because of its development projects and people-oriented assistance. The use of Chabahar reinforces this image by showing that India is willing to invest in practical delivery mechanisms. Humanitarian diplomacy becomes more credible when supported by physical routes. In this sense, Chabahar gives operational meaning to India's statement of solidarity with the Afghan people.

Chabahar's humanitarian role is particularly important when Pakistan routes are disrupted. Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan for transit has often exposed it to border closures and political pressure. In such situations, an alternative route becomes essential. Chabahar can carry food grains, medicines, relief supplies and essential goods. This makes it a corridor of resilience during crisis.

The port can also support international humanitarian efforts. If managed effectively, Chabahar could be used by multiple actors to send assistance to Afghanistan, subject to political and logistical arrangements. This would strengthen its identity as a regional public good. A port that serves humanitarian purposes gains diplomatic legitimacy beyond narrow national interest.

However, humanitarian supplies through Chabahar require efficient coordination. Port handling, customs clearance, road transport, security arrangements, Afghan distribution networks and monitoring mechanisms must work together. Humanitarian corridors fail when logistics are weak. Therefore, India, Iran and Afghanistan must develop strong administrative systems to ensure timely delivery.

The humanitarian function of Chabahar also requires insulation from political volatility. Assistance to ordinary Afghans should not be held hostage to regional rivalries. India has often tried to distinguish between support for Afghan people and the politics of Afghan regimes. Chabahar helps maintain that distinction by providing a route for people-centred assistance.

In conclusion, Chabahar's role in humanitarian supplies gives the port a moral and diplomatic dimension. It is not only a project of access, but also a project of assistance. It allows India to support Afghanistan's food security and welfare while strengthening Iran's role as a transit partner. In the refined language of humanitarian geopolitics, Chabahar is the *relief corridor through which strategy acquires compassion*.

8.3.2 Trade Access

Trade access is another major dimension of Chabahar's importance for Afghanistan. Afghanistan's economic development requires access to external markets, ports, investors, imports and export destinations. As a landlocked country, Afghanistan cannot develop sustained trade without reliable transit corridors. Chabahar offers such a corridor through Iran. It gives Afghanistan a route to the Indian Ocean and connects it with India's large market. This makes Chabahar central to Afghanistan's trade diversification.

Afghanistan exports products such as dry fruits, fresh fruits, carpets, saffron, medicinal herbs, minerals and agricultural goods. India is a natural market for many of these products because of demand, historical familiarity and cultural proximity. However, trade becomes difficult when routes are unreliable. Chabahar can reduce uncertainty and provide a more dependable pathway. Afghan exporters can benefit from access to Indian ports and consumers through Iran.

Indian exporters also benefit. India can send pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, textiles, tea, rice, machinery, construction material, educational

supplies and consumer goods to Afghanistan through Chabahar. This creates a two-way commercial relationship. Trade is most sustainable when movement occurs in both directions. Chabahar can help create that balance.

Trade access through Chabahar also reduces Pakistan's leverage. When Afghanistan depends excessively on Pakistani ports, border closures can disrupt trade and raise costs. Chabahar gives Afghan traders another option. Even if Pakistan remains geographically closer for some routes, the existence of an alternative changes bargaining dynamics. Traders gain confidence when they know that commerce will not stop because one border closes. This is the essence of *corridor resilience*.

Chabahar also supports Afghanistan's integration into regional value chains. With improved logistics, Afghan products can reach Indian processing, packaging and retail networks. Indian firms can invest in Afghan agriculture, cold storage, fruit processing, pharmaceuticals and mining-related supply chains. Iran can provide transit and logistics. This trilateral economic structure can generate mutual benefit.

The port also connects Afghanistan to Central Asia and beyond. Afghanistan can become not only a destination but also a transit space if security conditions improve. Chabahar can link Afghanistan with Central Asian routes, creating wider regional movement. Such connectivity would revive Afghanistan's historical role as a bridge rather than a battlefield. This is one of the deeper strategic hopes associated with Chabahar.

However, trade access depends on operational efficiency. Traders require predictable tariffs, storage facilities, customs transparency, cargo tracking, banking channels, insurance and safe roads. If costs are high or procedures are slow, traders may avoid the route. Therefore, Chabahar's trade potential must be supported by professional logistics. Port diplomacy must be matched by commercial discipline.

Afghanistan's current political situation also affects trade. Recognition issues, sanctions concerns, banking restrictions and administrative uncertainty can limit commercial expansion. India must carefully balance humanitarian and trade engagement with diplomatic considerations. Iran, too, must manage its relations with Afghan authorities and border systems. Despite these complications, the trade logic remains strong because Afghanistan needs diversified access.

Trade access through Chabahar also has psychological significance. It gives Afghanistan a sense that it is not geographically imprisoned. It gives India a sense that its Afghan policy is not hostage to Pakistan. It gives Iran a sense that it can serve as a regional connector. These psychological effects matter because connectivity is not only physical; it is also political confidence.

In conclusion, Chabahar gives Afghanistan valuable trade access to India and the Indian Ocean. It supports Afghan exports, Indian exports, transit diversification, regional integration and economic sovereignty. It reduces dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes and opens possibilities for a more balanced regional trade system. In the refined language of geoeconomics, Chabahar is the *commercial doorway through which landlocked Afghanistan can reach the sea and through which India can reach the Afghan market*.

Concluding Observation

Chabahar's value as an alternative to the Pakistan route lies in its ability to transform regional geography. It allows India to bypass Pakistan's transit denial, reach Afghanistan, open routes toward Central Asia and support humanitarian as well as commercial engagement. For Afghanistan, Chabahar provides an alternative maritime outlet and reduces dependence on politically vulnerable routes. For Iran, it strengthens the country's role as a corridor state and enhances the importance of its south-eastern coastline.

The Chabahar–Afghanistan and Chabahar–Central Asia routes represent two levels of India's connectivity ambition. The first is immediate and humanitarian-commercial; the second is continental and strategic. Together, they make Chabahar one of India's most important foreign-policy instruments in the twenty-first century. It is a port, but more than a port; it is a *corridor of access, autonomy and regional resilience*.

8.3.3 Strategic Cooperation

Chabahar has become one of the most significant instruments of *strategic cooperation* among India, Iran and Afghanistan. Its significance lies not merely in the movement of goods, but in the construction of a regional architecture in which geography, diplomacy, security, trade and humanitarian responsibility converge. For India, Chabahar enables access to Afghanistan without dependence on Pakistan. For Iran, it strengthens the role of Sistan and Baluchestan as a corridor region and enhances Iran's importance as a transit state. For Afghanistan, it offers an alternative outlet to the sea and

reduces the strategic vulnerability of being landlocked. Thus, Chabahar creates a triangular cooperation pattern based on *access*, *autonomy* and *regional resilience*.

Strategic cooperation through Chabahar must be understood as a response to the fractured political geography of South and Central Asia. India's direct land access to Afghanistan is obstructed by Pakistan, while Afghanistan's economic movement has often been vulnerable to Pakistan's border politics. Iran's Chabahar coast offers an alternative route that does not require Pakistan's consent. This makes Chabahar a project of *geopolitical circumvention* and *constructive regionalism*. India does not use Chabahar to create conflict; rather, it uses it to create options. Options are the essence of strategy.

The strategic cooperation surrounding Chabahar also reflects India's long-standing commitment to Afghan stability. India has invested in Afghan infrastructure, education, health, capacity building and humanitarian assistance. Yet such engagement requires physical access. Chabahar supplies the route through which Indian developmental commitment can acquire material expression. A school, a hospital, a road, a food shipment or a medical consignment cannot be delivered by sentiment alone; it needs corridors. Chabahar therefore transforms India's Afghan goodwill into *operational diplomacy*.

For Iran, Chabahar offers an opportunity to convert geography into diplomatic capital. Iran is situated between the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caspian region. Through Chabahar, Iran can become a regional connector rather than merely a sanctions-affected energy state. It can strengthen trade, promote regional development, generate transit revenue and increase its relevance for India, Afghanistan and Central Asian republics. In this sense, Chabahar enhances Iran's *corridor sovereignty*.

The trilateral Chabahar framework also carries symbolic importance. It shows that India, Iran and Afghanistan can cooperate despite sanctions, instability and regional rivalry. It demonstrates that connectivity can serve development rather than domination. The project rests on a vision of *inclusive connectivity*, where a port becomes a common platform rather than an exclusive geopolitical possession. This gives Chabahar moral and diplomatic legitimacy.

Security is also implicit in Chabahar cooperation. Afghanistan's instability, terrorism, narcotics trafficking, refugee movements and extremist networks affect both India and Iran. Although Chabahar is not a military alliance, it supports a wider strategic objective: preventing Afghanistan from becoming isolated, economically suffocated or excessively dependent on any single transit route. Economic connectivity can support political stability by creating movement, trade and livelihoods. Therefore, Chabahar's strategic cooperation is not only about roads and ports; it is about the long-term stabilization of a vulnerable regional space.

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has complicated the strategic environment, but it has not erased Chabahar's importance. India and Iran both face the necessity of pragmatic engagement with Afghan realities while preserving their concerns about terrorism, minorities, humanitarian distress and regional security. Chabahar provides a relatively non-ideological platform through which assistance and commerce can continue even when political relations are complex. This is the value of infrastructure: it can preserve engagement when diplomacy becomes difficult.

Chabahar also strengthens India's strategic autonomy. It ensures that India's Afghan policy is not entirely hostage to Pakistan's land routes. It enables India to maintain an independent presence in the region. It also helps India participate in Eurasian connectivity without joining projects that contradict its sovereignty concerns. Strategic autonomy is not only a doctrine of speech; it requires physical infrastructure. Chabahar is one such instrument.

In conclusion, Chabahar-based strategic cooperation is a sophisticated form of regional statecraft. It links India's Afghan policy, Iran's corridor ambitions and Afghanistan's need for economic sovereignty. It provides an alternative to Pakistan-dominated transit, supports humanitarian and commercial movement, and strengthens India's wider Central Asian outreach. In the refined language of geopolitics, Chabahar is the *strategic corridor through which India, Iran and Afghanistan convert geographical compulsion into cooperative possibility*.

8.4 Chabahar and Central Asia

Chabahar's importance extends far beyond Afghanistan. Its larger strategic horizon lies in Central Asia. The Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—are landlocked states

with rich energy resources, minerals, agricultural potential, historical-cultural depth and geostrategic significance. Yet their access to global markets depends on reliable corridors. Chabahar offers them a possible southern route to the Indian Ocean through Iran. For India, the port provides a practical pathway to the Central Asian heartland, overcoming the geographical barrier created by Pakistan and the instability of Afghanistan.

India's Central Asian engagement has long been constrained by weak physical connectivity. Historical relations are deep, but modern logistics have remained poor. Indian diplomacy has emphasized cultural links, development cooperation, capacity building, pharmaceuticals, information technology, education, defence training and counter-terrorism. Yet without efficient connectivity, trade remains below potential. Chabahar offers the possibility of converting India's cultural and diplomatic goodwill into economic and strategic substance.

Central Asia's importance for India is multidimensional. It has energy resources, including oil, gas and uranium. It occupies a sensitive location between Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan and the Caspian region. It is affected by terrorism, narcotics trafficking and instability from Afghanistan. It also provides opportunities for Indian pharmaceuticals, textiles, machinery, education, healthcare and technology services. Chabahar can help India reach this region with greater credibility.

Iran is central to this vision because it lies between India's maritime routes and Central Asia's landlocked geography. Through Chabahar, cargo can move from Indian ports to Iran's Gulf of Oman coast and then northward through Iran's road and railway networks toward Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and beyond. This gives India a route to Central Asia that does not depend on Pakistan. Thus, Chabahar is the *southern maritime gateway to Central Asia*.

Chabahar also has a relationship with the International North–South Transport Corridor. The INSTC seeks to link India, Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through multimodal transport. Chabahar can operate as one of the southern nodes of this larger system. When Chabahar and INSTC are viewed together, they create a wider Eurasian connectivity architecture. This architecture is essential for India's ambition to become a serious participant in continental trade and strategic affairs.

8.4.1 Gateway to Landlocked States

Chabahar is a gateway to landlocked states because it offers Central Asian republics access to the sea through Iran. Landlocked geography is a major structural limitation. A landlocked state must depend on neighbours for access to ports, shipping routes and global markets. This dependence can increase trade costs, create delays and expose the state to political pressure. Chabahar helps reduce such vulnerability by providing another route to the Indian Ocean.

The Central Asian states are deeply aware of the strategic importance of connectivity diversification. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan do not wish to depend exclusively on one corridor, one great power or one transit system. They pursue *multi-vector diplomacy*. Chabahar fits this logic because it offers a southern route through Iran to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. It strengthens their ability to reach India and other markets without relying entirely on northern, eastern or western corridors.

For India, Chabahar's gateway function is equally important. It allows India to connect with Central Asian states not only through summits and cultural programmes but through cargo, investment and logistics. A gateway transforms diplomacy into movement. When goods can move, partnerships become more credible. Therefore, Chabahar gives India's Central Asia policy physical substance.

Turkmenistan is particularly relevant because of its geographical position. It borders Iran and can connect Central Asian routes with Iranian territory. Uzbekistan, with its demographic and economic weight, is also significant because it seeks multiple outlets for trade. Kazakhstan offers energy, uranium and industrial opportunities. Tajikistan is important for security and historical-cultural reasons. Kyrgyzstan, though smaller, is part of Central Asia's broader connectivity matrix. Chabahar provides a potential common route for all these states.

The gateway role also supports India's energy diplomacy. Central Asia contains hydrocarbons, uranium and other strategic resources. India's energy and mineral security can benefit from better access. Although pipelines and resource projects face political and logistical obstacles, improved transport

routes can support equipment movement, trade and investment. Chabahar therefore contributes indirectly to India's resource diplomacy.

A gateway also has psychological significance. Central Asian states often see India as a benign civilizational partner, but physical distance and weak connectivity reduce India's practical influence. Chabahar can help close this gap. It allows India to appear not merely as a distant cultural friend but as a reachable economic partner. This is crucial in a region where China, Russia, Turkey and Iran already possess stronger physical or historical networks.

The gateway function is also useful for Afghanistan if stability improves. Afghanistan can become a connecting space between Chabahar and Central Asia. The Zaranj–Delaram route and Afghanistan's ring-road network could support movement toward Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and onward routes. However, because Afghanistan remains politically unstable, routes through Iran toward Turkmenistan and the Caspian region also remain important. Chabahar's value lies in its flexibility.

In conclusion, Chabahar is a gateway to landlocked states because it offers Central Asia a southern maritime outlet and gives India access to an otherwise difficult continental region. It reduces dependence on limited corridors, supports multi-vector diplomacy and transforms India's Central Asia policy into a corridor-based strategy. In geopolitical language, Chabahar is the *sea-door for landlocked Eurasia*.

8.4.2 Trade and Transit Potential

Chabahar's trade and transit potential is immense because it can connect India, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe through a multimodal network. Trade potential refers to the exchange of goods and services; transit potential refers to the movement of cargo through one territory to another. Chabahar possesses both. It can support India–Iran trade, India–Afghanistan trade, India–Central Asia trade, and wider INSTC-based movement toward Eurasia. This makes it a port of *layered geoeconomic utility*.

For India, Chabahar can facilitate exports of pharmaceuticals, textiles, tea, rice, engineering goods, machinery, medical equipment, automobiles, agricultural products and consumer goods. Central Asian and Afghan markets need many of these products. India's pharmaceutical industry, in particular, has strong potential because Indian medicines are cost-effective and trusted

in many developing regions. Chabahar can reduce logistical barriers and strengthen Indian exports.

For Central Asian states, Chabahar can support exports of energy products, fertilizers, minerals, metals, cotton, dry fruits, agricultural goods and industrial inputs. It can also provide access to Indian ports and onward global markets. A functioning southern corridor would reduce their dependence on traditional routes and enhance their economic flexibility. In trade diplomacy, more routes mean more bargaining power.

The transit potential of Chabahar is especially important for Iran. Transit states earn revenue, build logistics industries, develop border regions and acquire diplomatic relevance. Iran's ambition to become a corridor state is strengthened by Chabahar. If cargo moves from India through Iran to Central Asia and Russia, Iran becomes not merely a destination but a passage. Such a role increases Iran's regional importance despite sanctions and diplomatic isolation.

Chabahar can also support supply-chain diversification. The twenty-first century has witnessed pandemics, wars, shipping disruptions, sanctions and geopolitical fragmentation. Countries now seek alternative routes to avoid excessive dependence on any single corridor. Chabahar offers India one such alternative. It can diversify India's access to Eurasia and reduce vulnerability to disruptions in other routes. This is the logic of *supply-chain resilience*.

The port's trade potential is also connected with the Shahid Beheshti Terminal. Efficient cargo handling, container facilities, warehousing, customs systems and road-rail connectivity are necessary for trade expansion. A port becomes commercially meaningful only when it is operationally competitive. Therefore, Chabahar's success depends not merely on strategic declarations but on practical logistics: cranes, roads, railways, customs digitalization, insurance, shipping frequency and private-sector confidence.

The transit potential also depends on integration with the INSTC. If Chabahar is effectively linked with Iranian rail and road corridors toward the Caspian region, Russia and Central Asia, it can become part of a transcontinental logistics network. This would allow India to reduce travel distance and improve competitiveness in Eurasian trade. Such integration would transform Chabahar from a regional port into a *trans-Eurasian node*.

However, trade and transit potential cannot be realized automatically. Sanctions increase risk for banks, insurers and companies. Afghanistan's instability affects the route's reliability. Infrastructure delays raise costs. Central Asian states may be cautious due to competing interests of Russia, China and other actors. Commercial users will not shift to Chabahar only because it is strategic; they will shift if it is reliable, affordable and predictable. Thus, commercial discipline must accompany strategic ambition.

In conclusion, Chabahar's trade and transit potential is one of the strongest reasons for India's sustained interest. It can carry Indian exports, Afghan goods, Central Asian commodities and Eurasian cargo. It can generate revenue for Iran, options for Afghanistan and access for India. In geoeconomic language, Chabahar is the *logistical fulcrum through which maritime India can enter continental markets*.

8.4.3 India's Central Asia Policy

India's Central Asia policy is based on historical connection, strategic necessity, energy interest, security concern and economic opportunity. Central Asia is part of India's extended neighbourhood. It has cultural linkages with India through Buddhism, Sufi networks, Persianate civilization, trade, manuscripts, architecture and political history. However, modern India's engagement with the region has been constrained by geography. Chabahar is central because it can help overcome this limitation.

India's policy toward Central Asia received renewed attention through the *Connect Central Asia Policy* and later through India–Central Asia summit mechanisms. These initiatives emphasize political dialogue, trade, connectivity, energy, security, culture, education, capacity building, defence cooperation and counter-terrorism. Yet the success of this policy depends heavily on physical routes. Without connectivity, India's policy risks remaining declaratory. Chabahar provides the route needed to make the policy operational.

Afghanistan is an important factor in India's Central Asia policy. A stable Afghanistan can connect South Asia with Central Asia. An unstable Afghanistan blocks routes and spreads insecurity. India and Central Asian states share concerns about terrorism, extremism and narcotics. Iran, through Chabahar, provides a route that can support Afghan connectivity and Central

Asian access. Therefore, Chabahar links India's Afghan policy with its Central Asia policy.

India's Central Asia policy also has an energy dimension. Kazakhstan's uranium, Turkmenistan's gas, Uzbekistan's resources and the wider region's mineral potential are important for India. Yet resource diplomacy requires transport routes, financial mechanisms and political trust. Chabahar cannot solve every problem, but it strengthens India's credibility by offering a feasible access pathway. It gives India a platform from which energy and trade discussions can become more concrete.

Security cooperation is another pillar. India and Central Asian states face concerns regarding radicalization, terrorism, cyber security, narcotics and instability from Afghanistan. India has participated in dialogues and training initiatives. Better connectivity through Chabahar could support logistical and diplomatic coordination, although security cooperation will remain sensitive and state-specific. The port is not a military project, but it supports the broader security architecture by enabling movement and engagement.

India's Central Asia policy also includes cultural and educational diplomacy. Scholarships, language studies, medical tourism, film, yoga, Buddhism, Sufism and people-to-people contact all strengthen India's image. However, soft power becomes stronger when accompanied by trade and connectivity. Chabahar can support this transition from soft influence to comprehensive engagement.

The policy also operates in a competitive environment. China's Belt and Road Initiative has deeply expanded Chinese connectivity in Central Asia. Russia retains security and historical influence. Turkey promotes Turkic cultural and political links. Iran has civilizational and geographical ties. India must therefore carve out a realistic role. Chabahar allows India to participate without claiming dominance. It provides an entry point for *non-hegemonic engagement*.

India's Central Asia policy is also aligned with multipolarity. Central Asian states prefer diversified partnerships. They do not want excessive dependence on any one power. India, through Chabahar, can offer another vector. This fits their own foreign-policy preference and India's vision of a balanced Eurasian order. Chabahar therefore serves not only India's interest but also Central Asia's desire for strategic diversification.

In conclusion, Chabahar is central to India's Central Asia policy because it supplies the missing element: connectivity. India has history, goodwill, capabilities and strategic interest in Central Asia, but it needs access. Chabahar provides that access. In the refined language of diplomacy, Chabahar is the *corridor that converts India's Central Asian aspiration into regional presence*.

8.5 Challenges Before Chabahar

Despite its immense strategic importance, Chabahar faces serious challenges. These challenges include U.S. sanctions, infrastructure delays, Afghanistan's instability, regional rivalries, banking restrictions, private-sector hesitation, commercial uncertainty and competing connectivity projects. The port is strategically attractive, but its operationalization is complex. In international relations, strategic importance does not automatically guarantee practical success. It requires sustained implementation.

The challenges before Chabahar are not merely technical. They are political, financial, diplomatic and security-related. The port exists in Iran, a country subject to sanctions. It connects to Afghanistan, a country marked by instability and uncertain international recognition after the Taliban's return. It aims at Central Asia, a region influenced by Russia, China, Turkey and Iran. It involves India, which must balance relations with Iran, the United States, Gulf states, Israel and Central Asian republics. Thus, Chabahar is located in a highly complex geopolitical environment.

However, the existence of challenges does not diminish the port's importance. Rather, it reveals why the port needs careful statecraft. A simple project would not require such diplomatic perseverance. Chabahar is difficult because it is consequential. It challenges Pakistan's transit monopoly, expands India's regional reach, strengthens Iran's corridor role and offers alternatives to landlocked states. Therefore, difficulties are part of its strategic weight.

8.5.1 U.S. Sanctions

U.S. sanctions are the most serious external challenge before Chabahar. Iran has been subject to extensive sanctions linked to nuclear issues, regional activities, terrorism-related designations, missile concerns and wider U.S.–Iran hostility. Although Chabahar was treated at times as a special case

because of its relevance to Afghanistan's development and regional connectivity, the sanctions environment has remained uncertain. This uncertainty affects investors, banks, shipping companies, insurers and private firms.

Sanctions affect Chabahar through *financial deterrence*. Even when a particular project may be politically justified or legally exempted, banks and companies often hesitate because they fear future penalties. International banking depends heavily on dollar clearing and access to Western financial systems. Firms working with Iranian entities may worry about secondary sanctions, compliance risk and reputational exposure. This makes normal commercial activity difficult.

The revocation of the sanctions waiver for Chabahar created renewed concern because it exposed Indian entities and companies to possible risk. Such developments complicate India's long-term planning. Infrastructure projects require predictability. If the legal environment changes suddenly, investors become cautious. This slows cargo growth, equipment procurement, financing and private-sector participation. Chabahar's success depends not only on strategic will but also on legal and financial stability.

Sanctions also affect shipping and insurance. Cargo movement requires marine insurance, protection-and-indemnity cover, port services and international logistics confidence. If insurance providers or shipping firms fear sanctions exposure, cargo movement becomes expensive or uncertain. Even a port with excellent geography cannot flourish without a reliable commercial ecosystem. Sanctions weaken that ecosystem.

India's diplomacy must therefore manage a delicate balance. India values strategic relations with the United States, but it also values Chabahar for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. India must explain that Chabahar is a connectivity and humanitarian project, not a project designed to undermine any third country. This diplomatic framing is essential. Chabahar must be presented as a *regional public good* rather than a sanctions-evasion instrument.

Iran, however, may view sanctions differently. Tehran often sees sanctions as unjust pressure and expects friendly countries to resist them. India, while preserving strategic autonomy, must also protect its companies from legal and financial risk. This creates a tension between political desire and commercial

feasibility. Managing this tension requires continuous dialogue with both Iran and the United States.

Sanctions also prevent deeper infrastructure financing. Large-scale development requires loans, foreign exchange, private investment, equipment suppliers and technical partners. Many of these actors avoid Iran due to sanctions. As a result, public-sector commitment becomes more important, but public-sector funding alone may not be enough to transform Chabahar into a major commercial hub. This limits the speed of development.

In conclusion, U.S. sanctions are the most formidable challenge before Chabahar because they attack the financial and commercial foundations of port development. They create uncertainty, discourage private participation, complicate banking and raise shipping risk. Yet sanctions do not erase Chabahar's strategic value. They merely make its realization more difficult. India's task is to preserve the project through *legal caution, diplomatic persuasion and strategic persistence*.

8.5.2 Infrastructure Delay

Infrastructure delay is another major challenge before Chabahar. Ports do not become strategic hubs merely through political declarations. They require berths, cranes, container yards, warehouses, customs facilities, road connections, railway links, digital systems, power supply, security arrangements and efficient administration. Chabahar's strategic vision is large, but its operational success depends upon the slow and demanding work of infrastructure building.

The development of the Shahid Beheshti Terminal has made progress, but delays have repeatedly affected the project. Sanctions, financing constraints, procurement difficulties, bureaucratic processes, coordination problems and regional uncertainty have slowed implementation. India has allocated funds and undertaken equipment and terminal responsibilities, but the transformation of Chabahar into a full regional hub requires much more than terminal operation. It requires integrated hinterland connectivity.

The Chabahar–Zahedan railway is particularly important. Without strong road and rail links from the port into Iran's interior and toward Afghanistan and Central Asia, the port cannot realize its full transit potential. A port disconnected from the hinterland is like a door opening into a wall. Rail and

road connectivity are therefore essential. Delays in these links reduce cargo competitiveness and discourage traders from using the route.

Infrastructure delay also affects commercial credibility. Traders and logistics companies choose routes based on cost, time, reliability and predictability. If Chabahar's road, rail, customs and cargo-handling systems remain incomplete or uncertain, commercial users may prefer established routes despite political disadvantages. A strategic route must also be economically rational. Therefore, India, Iran and regional partners must make Chabahar commercially competitive.

Coordination among multiple countries is also difficult. Chabahar's success depends on India, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asian republics. Each has its own bureaucracy, regulations, customs systems, political priorities and infrastructure capacities. Multinational connectivity projects often suffer from coordination gaps. Efficient implementation requires joint working groups, digital customs, cargo tracking, dispute-resolution mechanisms and regular diplomatic follow-up.

Infrastructure delay is also linked with private-sector hesitation. Private logistics firms, shipping companies and exporters will not fully commit unless they see stable infrastructure and legal clarity. Public-sector enthusiasm may initiate a project, but private-sector usage sustains it. Therefore, Chabahar must move from strategic symbolism to commercial viability. This requires route promotion, tariff rationalization, cargo guarantees and logistics professionalism.

The problem is not unique to Chabahar. Many major connectivity projects across the world suffer delays because of finance, terrain, politics and administration. However, Chabahar's delays are more sensitive because the port is strategically important. Every delay gives competing corridors more time to strengthen. China-backed routes, traditional northern routes and Pakistan-based corridors continue to evolve. India must therefore avoid excessive slowness.

Nevertheless, infrastructure delay should not lead to strategic pessimism. Large connectivity projects take time, especially in sanction-affected and unstable regions. Chabahar's long-term value remains strong. The correct approach is *strategic patience with operational urgency*: India and Iran must

remain patient about the long-term vision but urgent about practical implementation.

In conclusion, infrastructure delay limits Chabahar's immediate effectiveness but does not negate its strategic importance. The port's future depends on terminals, railways, roads, customs, warehousing and hinterland connectivity. Without infrastructure, vision remains incomplete; with infrastructure, Chabahar can become a genuine regional hub. Therefore, infrastructure development is the decisive bridge between Chabahar's geopolitical promise and commercial reality.

8.5.3 Regional Instability

Regional instability is the third major challenge before Chabahar. The port is located in a turbulent geopolitical environment. Iran faces sanctions and tensions with the United States, Israel and some Gulf actors. Afghanistan remains unstable after decades of war and the Taliban's return to power. Pakistan–Afghanistan relations are frequently tense. Central Asia is influenced by Russia, China and shifting security concerns. The wider West Asian region is marked by conflict, rivalry and maritime insecurity. Chabahar must operate within this complex environment.

Afghanistan's instability is especially important. Chabahar's value for India depends heavily on its ability to connect with Afghanistan. If Afghanistan is politically unstable, commercially uncertain or internationally isolated, cargo movement becomes difficult. Recognition issues, banking restrictions, security concerns and administrative unpredictability affect trade. Humanitarian assistance may continue, but regular commerce requires stable institutions. Therefore, Afghanistan's internal situation directly affects Chabahar's success.

The Taliban's return to power has created a new diplomatic reality. India and Iran both have to engage pragmatically while remaining concerned about terrorism, extremism, minority rights and regional security. Chabahar can continue to serve humanitarian and limited trade functions, but large-scale connectivity requires a more predictable Afghan environment. Thus, regional instability turns Chabahar from a purely logistical project into a politically sensitive corridor.

Iran's regional tensions also affect Chabahar. Escalation involving Iran and the United States, Israel or Gulf actors can increase shipping risks, insurance

costs and investor hesitation. Although Chabahar is located on the Gulf of Oman and not deep inside the Persian Gulf, it cannot be fully insulated from regional crises. Maritime instability in the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman or Strait of Hormuz area can affect confidence in the route.

Pakistan's position adds another layer. Pakistan may view Chabahar as reducing its transit leverage over Afghanistan and India. While Chabahar is not necessarily anti-Pakistan, it does offer an alternative to Pakistan's routes. This may create strategic discomfort. Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and its relations with China also affect the regional environment in which Chabahar operates. Therefore, the project cannot be separated from South Asian geopolitics.

Central Asia's geopolitical environment is also complex. Central Asian republics pursue multi-vector diplomacy and must balance relations with Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India and the West. They may welcome Chabahar but proceed cautiously. Their infrastructure decisions are influenced by economics, security and great-power relations. India must therefore build trust patiently and show that Chabahar offers practical benefits rather than merely strategic slogans.

Regional instability also affects cargo insurance and private-sector confidence. Businesses avoid routes that appear politically risky. Even if governments support Chabahar, private traders will ask whether goods will move safely, payments will clear, and cargo will reach on time. Stability is therefore a commercial requirement. A corridor cannot survive only on strategic logic; it requires confidence among traders.

Narcotics trafficking, terrorism and smuggling also affect the region. Afghanistan's narcotics economy, porous borders and extremist networks create security challenges for Iran and Central Asia. Iran has historically faced serious narcotics pressure from Afghanistan. Any corridor passing through or near such zones requires strong security management. Chabahar's success depends partly on the ability of regional states to secure roads, borders and cargo movement.

Yet instability also strengthens Chabahar's necessity. When traditional routes are disrupted, alternatives become more valuable. When Pakistan–Afghanistan border closures occur, Afghan traders seek other routes. When Central Asian states seek diversification, southern corridors become

attractive. Thus, instability is both a challenge and a reason for Chabahar's relevance. The port is valuable precisely because it provides redundancy in a volatile region.

In conclusion, regional instability is a major challenge before Chabahar because it affects Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia and maritime confidence. It can slow cargo movement, discourage investment and complicate diplomacy. Yet the same instability also confirms the need for alternative routes. Chabahar is therefore a project of *resilience amid disorder*. Its success will depend on India's ability to combine strategic patience, diplomatic balance, commercial realism and regional security awareness.

Concluding Observation

Chabahar is one of the most strategically significant connectivity projects in India's foreign policy. Its relevance to Afghanistan is humanitarian, commercial and strategic. Its relevance to Central Asia is continental, resource-oriented and geopolitical. It gives India access to landlocked regions, supports Afghanistan's trade autonomy, enhances Iran's corridor role and links with India's Central Asia policy. It converts India's maritime power into continental access.

However, Chabahar faces formidable challenges. U.S. sanctions create financial and legal uncertainty; infrastructure delays weaken operational credibility; and regional instability affects trade, investment and security. Yet these obstacles do not reduce the port's importance. They merely show that Chabahar is a difficult but necessary project. In the language of grand strategy, Chabahar is not an ordinary port facility; it is a *geostrategic corridor of autonomy, access and resilience*. Its future will depend on the endurance of India–Iran cooperation, the stabilization of Afghanistan, the interest of Central Asian states, and India's ability to practise patient, sophisticated and multi-directional diplomacy.

Chapter 9:

International North–South Transport Corridor and India–Iran Cooperation

The *International North–South Transport Corridor* occupies a seminal position in the evolving architecture of India–Iran cooperation. It is not merely a transport arrangement; it is a *geo-economic corridor*, a *strategic logistics architecture*, a *Eurasian access mechanism*, and a *continental-maritime bridge* connecting India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia, Central Asia and Europe. In a world increasingly shaped by supply-chain disruptions, sanctions, maritime chokepoints, regional wars and great-power rivalries, the INSTC represents India's search for alternative routes, diversified trade corridors and strategic connectivity beyond the traditional Suez Canal pathway.

The significance of the INSTC lies in its capacity to convert India's maritime access into continental reach. India is a major Indian Ocean power, but its direct overland access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is constrained by Pakistan. Iran, by virtue of its geographical location, becomes the indispensable middle space through which India can enter the Eurasian interior. Therefore, India–Iran cooperation under the INSTC is not incidental; it is structurally necessary. Iran supplies the corridor's geographical spine. Without Iran, the INSTC loses its central connecting logic between the Indian Ocean and the Caspian-Eurasian region.

The INSTC must be understood as a product of the post-Cold War transformation of Eurasian geography. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia and the Caspian region acquired new importance. India, Iran and Russia began to recognize the need for more efficient north-south connectivity that could link South Asia with Eurasia. The traditional sea route from India to Russia and Europe through the Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Suez Canal, Mediterranean and northern European waters remained long, expensive and vulnerable to maritime disruptions. The INSTC offered an alternative: a multimodal corridor using sea, road and rail to shorten distance, reduce cost and diversify strategic access.

The corridor also reflects the intellectual logic found in classical geopolitical works such as *The Geographical Pivot of History* by Halford Mackinder, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* by Alfred Thayer Mahan, and *The Geography of the Peace* by Nicholas Spykman. Mackinder emphasized the strategic weight of Eurasian interiors; Mahan emphasized maritime trade and sea power; Spykman emphasized the rimland interface between land and sea. The INSTC brings these three logics together. It allows India's maritime routes to enter the continental heartland through Iran's rimland geography. Thus, the INSTC is a modern corridor where *sea power*, *land power* and *corridor power* converge.

9.1 Meaning of International North–South Transport Corridor

The *International North–South Transport Corridor* means a planned and partially operational multimodal transport network designed to connect India and the Indian Ocean region with Iran, the Caspian Sea, Russia, Central Asia and Europe. The term *North–South* indicates the broad direction of movement: from India and the Indian Ocean in the south toward Russia and Europe in the north, and from Russia and Eurasia southward toward Iran, the Gulf region and India. The term *international* signifies that the corridor crosses several sovereign territories and requires the cooperation of multiple states. The term *transport corridor* means that it is not a single road, railway or shipping line, but a coordinated network of ports, railways, roads, customs procedures, logistics systems and transit agreements.

The INSTC is *multimodal* because it uses different modes of transport: maritime shipping, road transport and railway movement. Cargo can move from Indian ports such as Mumbai or other western ports to Iranian ports, then travel by road or rail through Iran toward the Caspian region, and then move through Russia or other Eurasian routes toward northern Europe. In some variants, the corridor may use Bandar Abbas, Chabahar, Bandar-e-Anzali, Amirabad, Astrakhan, Baku, Moscow and St. Petersburg as important nodes. Thus, the INSTC is a web of possible routes rather than a single rigid line.

For India, the meaning of the INSTC is deeply strategic. It offers India an alternative to the traditional maritime route through the Suez Canal and Mediterranean Sea. It also gives India access to Russia, Central Asia and Europe through Iran. Since India's direct land access to Central Asia is

obstructed by Pakistan, the INSTC becomes a route of *strategic circumvention*. It enables India to engage Eurasia without depending on Pakistan-controlled geography. In this sense, the corridor is not merely commercial; it is an instrument of *connectivity autonomy*.

For Iran, the INSTC means a chance to become a major transit state. Iran's geography places it between the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Caspian Sea, Central Asia, Caucasus and South Asia. The INSTC allows Iran to monetize this geography. It can earn transit revenue, develop ports and railways, strengthen its regional importance, and reduce the effects of isolation by becoming indispensable to Eurasian connectivity. Thus, the INSTC enhances Iran's *corridor sovereignty*.

For Russia, the INSTC provides a southern route to the Indian Ocean and South Asian markets. This has become especially important in a period of sanctions and strained relations with the West. Russia's interest in southern connectivity has grown because routes toward Europe have become politically complicated. The INSTC offers Moscow an alternative commercial pathway toward Iran, India and the wider Indian Ocean. Therefore, the corridor has acquired renewed relevance in the contemporary geopolitical environment.

The meaning of the INSTC also includes *supply-chain resilience*. The world economy has learned from pandemics, wars, maritime disruptions and chokepoint vulnerability that excessive dependence on one route is risky. The Suez Canal blockage of 2021, the Red Sea crisis, sanctions-related disruptions and regional conflicts have strengthened global interest in alternative logistics corridors. The INSTC fits this wider trend. It offers not merely a shorter route, but a route-diversification strategy.

The corridor is also important because it connects with other initiatives, including Chabahar, the Ashgabat Agreement, Eurasian rail networks and Central Asian connectivity plans. When these are linked, they create a larger architecture of trans-regional movement. Chabahar can become a southern node; Iranian railways can become the internal spine; Caspian ports can become the maritime bridge; Russian railways can carry goods northward; and Central Asian routes can provide additional branches. Therefore, the INSTC is best understood as an evolving *corridor ecosystem*.

In conclusion, the International North–South Transport Corridor is a multimodal, multinational and multidimensional corridor designed to connect India with Iran, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. It is a trade route, but more than trade. It is a geopolitical instrument, a supply-chain alternative, an economic-development pathway and a diplomatic bridge. For India and Iran, it is one of the most significant frameworks through which geography can be transformed into strategic cooperation.

9.1.1 Concept and Origin

The concept of the INSTC emerged from the recognition that the traditional maritime route between India and Russia or northern Europe was long, expensive and vulnerable to disruptions. Cargo moving from India to Russia traditionally travelled by sea through the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean and then toward northern Europe and Russia. This route was commercially established but geographically extended. India, Iran and Russia therefore began to explore a shorter and more efficient north-south route using the Indian Ocean, Iranian territory, the Caspian region and Russian transport networks.

The origin of the INSTC can be traced to the Inter-Governmental Agreement signed by India, Iran and Russia at St. Petersburg in September 2000. This agreement laid the legal and diplomatic foundation for the corridor. The choice of the founding countries was geographically logical. India represented the southern maritime and commercial pole; Iran represented the central transit and corridor pole; and Russia represented the northern Eurasian and European pole. Together, these three states possessed the geographical continuity required for a north-south corridor.

The concept was ambitious because it sought to combine multiple transport modes and jurisdictions. Unlike a domestic highway or railway, an international corridor requires harmonization of customs, tariffs, documentation, insurance, port procedures, rail gauges, cargo handling, border management, security and banking arrangements. Therefore, the INSTC was not merely an engineering idea; it was a diplomatic and administrative project. It required states to coordinate sovereignty for the purpose of movement. This is why transport corridors are also exercises in *governance diplomacy*.

The origin of the INSTC must also be situated in the post-Cold War context. After 1991, the Eurasian space opened in new ways. Central Asian republics became independent; Russia recalibrated its international economic relations; Iran sought ways to strengthen transit relevance; and India began to expand its economic and strategic horizons after liberalization. The INSTC emerged from this environment of reconfigured geography. It was a response to the need for new routes in a new world order.

The concept also reflected India's growing interest in continental connectivity. India's economic liberalization after 1991 increased the importance of trade routes, energy access and market diversification. India's inability to access Central Asia through Pakistan made Iran more important. The INSTC gave India a formal framework to overcome this limitation. It allowed India to think beyond the subcontinent and to reconnect with Eurasia through a structured corridor.

Iran's participation in the origin of the INSTC was essential. Iran's territory connects southern maritime access with northern Caspian routes. Iranian ports such as Bandar Abbas, Chabahar, Bandar-e-Anzali and Amirabad are important nodes in different versions of the corridor. Iranian road and rail networks provide the land bridge between the Gulf/Indian Ocean and the Caspian/Eurasian region. Therefore, Iran was not a peripheral participant; it was the corridor's geographical heart.

Russia's participation gave the corridor its northern depth. Russian railways, inland cities, Caspian ports and access to northern Europe made the corridor commercially and strategically meaningful. For Russia, the INSTC offered a southern trade route and a connection to India's large market. In later years, as Russia faced deeper Western sanctions and geopolitical estrangement, the INSTC became even more relevant as an alternative Eurasian logistics channel.

The concept and origin of the INSTC also reveal a deeper geopolitical philosophy: states seek corridors when old routes are insufficient or politically vulnerable. The corridor represents a search for redundancy, efficiency and autonomy. It is a practical answer to the vulnerabilities of overdependence on conventional maritime routes. Therefore, the INSTC was born not merely from commercial calculation, but from strategic imagination.

In conclusion, the concept and origin of the INSTC lie in the desire of India, Iran and Russia to create a shorter, cheaper, multimodal and strategically resilient corridor between South Asia and Eurasia. Its founding agreement in 2000 gave legal form to a powerful geographical idea. In diplomatic language, the INSTC originated as an attempt to convert *Eurasian geography into cooperative infrastructure*.

9.1.2 Participating Regions

The participating regions of the INSTC include South Asia, the Persian Gulf region, Iran, the Caspian region, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia and northern Europe. The corridor is therefore not limited to three founding countries; it is a trans-regional network connecting several civilizational and economic spaces. This geographical breadth gives the INSTC its importance. It is a corridor of regions, not merely a corridor of states.

South Asia is represented most prominently by India. India is the southern anchor of the corridor. Its ports, markets, industries, refineries, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing sectors, agricultural products and consumer goods provide the cargo base for northward movement. India's western seaboard, especially ports on the Arabian Sea, becomes the maritime starting point. Through the INSTC, India can connect its economy with Eurasian markets more directly.

Iran is the central region of the corridor. It is the bridge between the Indian Ocean and the Caspian Sea. Iran's ports, roads, railways and customs systems determine the corridor's efficiency. Its geography allows it to connect the Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Therefore, Iran is the corridor's *geographical pivot*. If India is the southern anchor and Russia the northern anchor, Iran is the central hinge.

The Caspian region is another key participating space. The Caspian Sea links Iran with Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Ports such as Bandar-e-Anzali, Amirabad and Astrakhan play important roles in different route configurations. The Caspian is an inland sea, but in corridor politics it functions as a maritime bridge between Iran and the Eurasian north. Thus, the Caspian region gives the INSTC a distinctive inland-maritime character.

Russia is the northern strategic region of the corridor. Russian rail networks can move cargo from Caspian ports and southern regions toward Moscow, St. Petersburg and northern Europe. Russia's participation gives the INSTC

access to a vast Eurasian market and wider European connections. It also gives India a more direct route to Russia, a country with which India has long-standing defence, energy, nuclear and strategic relations.

The Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan and Armenia-related routes, is also important. The western route of the INSTC involves movement through Iran toward Azerbaijan and then northward to Russia. The Rasht–Astara railway link is often discussed as a crucial missing connection in this western branch. The Caucasus region is strategically sensitive because it connects the Caspian, Black Sea, Russia, Iran and Turkey. Its participation gives the corridor additional route options.

Central Asia is a participating region both directly and indirectly. Countries such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are important because they are landlocked, resource-rich and interested in diversified access to markets. The eastern branch of the INSTC can connect Iran with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, and wider routes can link India with Central Asian republics. This gives Central Asia a southern outlet and gives India a route into the Eurasian heartland.

The Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman regions are also part of the corridor's logic. They provide the maritime space through which Indian cargo can reach Iranian ports. Chabahar's location on the Gulf of Oman and Bandar Abbas's location near the Persian Gulf give Iran multiple southern gateways. These maritime regions connect the INSTC to the Indian Ocean world. Thus, the corridor is not purely land-based; it is a maritime-land network.

Northern Europe is the corridor's wider terminal region. St. Petersburg and other northern European connections make the INSTC relevant beyond Russia. The corridor's ambition is to link Indian Ocean commerce with northern Europe through Eurasia. Even if political conditions with Europe remain complex, the conceptual design of the corridor includes this wider European destination. This gives it transcontinental significance.

The participating regions also include economic communities and logistical systems. Freight forwarders, customs authorities, railway companies, ports, shipping firms, insurance bodies and banks are all functional participants. A corridor cannot operate only through ministries; it requires the cooperation of commercial and administrative actors. Therefore, the INSTC is both a state project and a logistics ecosystem.

In conclusion, the participating regions of the INSTC form a vast arc from India and the Indian Ocean through Iran and the Caspian region to Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Europe. This makes the corridor one of the most ambitious connectivity projects in Eurasia. Its regional breadth gives it both promise and complexity. In strategic language, the INSTC is a *trans-regional corridor binding South Asia to Eurasia through Iran's geopolitical middle space*.

9.1.3 Strategic Purpose

The strategic purpose of the INSTC is to create a shorter, more efficient, diversified and geopolitically resilient transport route between India and Eurasia. Its immediate purpose is commercial: to reduce transport time and cost for goods moving between India, Iran, Russia, Central Asia and Europe. However, its deeper purpose is strategic: to reduce dependence on traditional routes, bypass geopolitical blockages, expand India's continental access, strengthen Iran's transit role, and create a multipolar connectivity architecture.

For India, the most important strategic purpose of the INSTC is access to Eurasia. India's trade with Russia and Central Asia has long been constrained by distance and route limitations. The INSTC offers a practical alternative. It allows India to move goods through Iran toward the Caspian and Russia. It also creates possibilities for Central Asian engagement. This is essential for India's aspiration to become a major Eurasian actor rather than a country confined to South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

The corridor also serves the purpose of bypassing Pakistan's transit denial. Pakistan's refusal to provide India direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia has created a major obstacle in Indian foreign policy. The INSTC, especially when connected with Chabahar and Iranian routes, allows India to circumvent this obstacle. This gives India *strategic optionality*. In geopolitics, optionality is power because it prevents an adversarial state from monopolizing access.

The INSTC also supports India's economic diversification. India can use the corridor to export pharmaceuticals, textiles, engineering goods, machinery, agricultural products, automobiles, consumer goods and technology-related equipment. It can import energy, fertilizers, minerals, metals, timber and other commodities from Eurasia. A functioning corridor can expand trade

volumes and reduce logistical uncertainty. Therefore, the corridor serves as a tool of *trade diplomacy*.

For Iran, the strategic purpose of the INSTC is to become an indispensable transit state. Iran can benefit from transit revenue, infrastructure development, port modernization, railway expansion and regional diplomatic relevance. In a sanctions-affected environment, corridor-based significance gives Iran leverage. It allows Iran to show that its geography cannot be ignored. Thus, the INSTC supports Iran's aspiration to become a *regional logistics hub*.

For Russia, the corridor provides a southern access route to India and the Indian Ocean. This is especially important when traditional trade relations with the West face political constraints. The INSTC offers Russia a route toward South Asian markets and a way to diversify logistics. It also strengthens Russia's links with Iran and India, two major non-Western partners. Therefore, the corridor fits Russia's search for southward economic access.

The strategic purpose of the INSTC also includes reducing vulnerability to maritime chokepoints. The traditional Suez Canal route is long and exposed to disruptions. Events such as the Suez blockage, conflicts in the Red Sea and wider maritime insecurity have demonstrated the risks of route concentration. The INSTC offers an alternative. It does not replace the Suez route completely, but it provides redundancy. Redundancy is one of the most important features of resilient connectivity.

The corridor also supports multipolarity. It is not controlled by one great power; it involves multiple states with overlapping interests. India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Central Asian states and others can participate according to their needs. This differs from corridor models that create heavy dependence on a single sponsor. The INSTC can therefore be presented as a *consultative and sovereignty-respecting connectivity model*, especially when linked with India's official principles of transparent and participatory connectivity.

The strategic purpose of the corridor also includes linking Chabahar with wider Eurasian transport. Chabahar provides India with access to Iran and Afghanistan; INSTC connects Iran with the Caspian, Russia and Europe. When the two are integrated, India gains a broader corridor architecture. Chabahar becomes the southern maritime access point; Iran becomes the

transit spine; the Caspian becomes the inland sea bridge; Russia and Central Asia become the northern and eastern extensions. This integration gives India–Iran cooperation immense strategic depth.

The INSTC also has a symbolic purpose. It revives old civilizational and commercial routes in modern form. The historical movement of goods, ideas, languages, religions and peoples between India, Iran, Central Asia and Russia is reimagined through contemporary logistics. It is not nostalgia; it is the modernization of historical connectivity. This gives the corridor a civilizational aura in addition to its economic function.

However, the strategic purpose of the INSTC will be achieved only if practical obstacles are addressed. These include infrastructure gaps, customs inefficiencies, sanctions, banking problems, insurance constraints, rail connectivity, border delays, cargo volumes and political instability. A corridor's strategic vision must be matched by operational discipline. Without cargo, a corridor remains a map; with cargo, it becomes power.

In conclusion, the strategic purpose of the INSTC is to give India, Iran, Russia and Eurasian partners a resilient, multimodal and geopolitically significant route linking the Indian Ocean with the Caspian and northern Europe. For India, it is a corridor of access; for Iran, a corridor of transit relevance; for Russia, a corridor of southern outreach; for Central Asia, a corridor of diversification. In the refined language of grand strategy, the INSTC is a *geo-economic artery designed to reconnect India with the Eurasian heartland through Iran's indispensable geography*.

Concluding Observation

The International North–South Transport Corridor is one of the most important frameworks of India–Iran cooperation in the twenty-first century. It gives India a route to Iran, Central Asia, Russia and Europe; it gives Iran transit centrality; it gives Russia and Eurasian partners access to the Indian Ocean; and it gives landlocked regions new possibilities for trade diversification. Its meaning goes far beyond transport. It is a mechanism of *strategic autonomy, supply-chain resilience, regional integration and multipolar connectivity*.

The corridor's origin in the India–Iran–Russia initiative of 2000 reflects a clear recognition that Eurasian commerce required a shorter and more reliable north-south route. Its participating regions reveal its vast geographical

imagination. Its strategic purpose reveals its importance in contemporary geopolitics. In India–Iran relations, the INSTC is therefore not a peripheral project; it is a central pillar of connectivity cooperation. It transforms Iran from a neighbouring civilization and energy actor into the *geographical spine of India's Eurasian access strategy*.

9.2 Iran's Role in INSTC

Iran occupies the most indispensable position in the *International North–South Transport Corridor* because it forms the central geographical bridge between the Indian Ocean and the Eurasian landmass. If India is the southern maritime anchor and Russia is the northern continental anchor, Iran is the *strategic hinge* without which the corridor loses its operational coherence. The INSTC is not a mere cartographic line drawn across a map; it is a living architecture of ports, roads, railways, Caspian crossings, customs systems, cargo terminals and diplomatic arrangements. Iran supplies the corridor's central spine, transforming the Indian Ocean's maritime energy into Eurasia's continental mobility.

Iran's role is unique because of its *dual maritime-continental identity*. It is connected to the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman in the south, while its northern geography opens toward the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan and wider Eurasia. This makes Iran a country of corridors. It can connect India with Russia through the Caspian route, India with Central Asia through eastern and north-eastern routes, and India with the Caucasus through north-western routes. In the language of political geography, Iran is a *transit civilization*—a state whose location gives it the power to connect distant regions.

India's dependence on Iran within INSTC arises from the problem of access. India cannot directly reach Central Asia through Pakistan because of political hostility and transit denial. It cannot depend only on distant maritime routes through Suez and the Mediterranean because they are longer and vulnerable to maritime disruptions. Iran gives India a shorter, diversified and strategically significant passage into Eurasia. Thus, Iran's role in INSTC is not optional; it is structural. It is the geographical condition that makes India's northward corridor possible.

Iran's importance is also connected with the classical geopolitical insights of *The Geographical Pivot of History* by Halford Mackinder, *The Influence of*

Sea Power upon History by Alfred Thayer Mahan, and *The Geography of the Peace* by Nicholas Spykman. Mackinder underlined the significance of the Eurasian interior; Mahan emphasized the importance of sea routes and maritime commerce; Spykman highlighted the strategic value of rimlands. Iran stands precisely where these logics meet. It is a rimland state connecting sea power with continental power. Through Iran, India's maritime trade can enter Eurasia's interior.

Iran's role in INSTC has also acquired greater relevance in the contemporary global environment. The war in Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, sanctions on Iran, the instability of maritime chokepoints, Red Sea disruptions, and uncertainty in global supply chains have increased the need for alternative trade routes. The INSTC has therefore moved from being a slow-moving project of future possibility to a corridor of immediate strategic relevance. Iran's geography gives the corridor its credibility; its infrastructure gives the corridor its practicability; and its diplomacy gives the corridor its political meaning.

9.2.1 Iran as a Transit Hub

Iran functions as a *transit hub* because its geography allows cargo to move from the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf toward the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. A transit hub is not merely a place where goods pass through; it is a strategic space where routes converge, cargo is reorganized, modes of transport are changed, customs procedures are processed and regional influence is created. Iran's location gives it all the attributes of such a hub.

Iran's transit importance begins with its southern ports. Goods from India can move by sea to Iranian ports such as Bandar Abbas or Chabahar. From there, cargo can move northward through road and railway networks toward Caspian ports, the Azerbaijan border, Turkmenistan, Central Asia or Russia. This southern-to-northern movement is the essence of the INSTC. Iran turns maritime cargo into continental cargo. In this sense, Iran is the corridor's *conversion point* between sea and land.

The hub role also enhances Iran's economic and diplomatic leverage. Transit generates revenue, employment, logistics industries, port modernization, warehousing, customs services, transport companies and inland infrastructure. More importantly, it gives Iran a strategic identity beyond oil

and gas. A country under sanctions can gain significance if other states need its geography. Through INSTC, Iran seeks to present itself not only as an energy state but as a *connectivity state*.

For India, Iran's transit-hub role is crucial because it offers a route that bypasses Pakistan. India's goods can reach Iranian ports and move toward Russia, Central Asia or Europe without relying on Pakistan-controlled territory. This gives India *connectivity autonomy*. A rising power cannot allow its access to important regions to remain subject to an adversarial neighbour's permission. Iran's transit-hub role therefore strengthens India's strategic independence.

Iran also serves as a transit hub for Central Asian states. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are landlocked or geographically distant from open seas. Their economies need diversified outlets. Iran offers a southern route to the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean. Chabahar and Bandar Abbas can function as gateways for their trade. This makes Iran valuable not only to India but also to Central Asian republics seeking *multi-vector connectivity*.

Iran's hub status is reinforced by its Caspian access. The Caspian Sea connects Iran with Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Iranian Caspian ports such as Bandar-e-Anzali and Amirabad can link with Russian ports such as Astrakhan and Olya. This gives the INSTC a distinctive inland-maritime dimension. Cargo can move by sea from India to Iran, by road or rail through Iran, by ship across the Caspian, and then by Russian railways toward northern destinations. Such multimodal complexity is precisely what makes Iran a hub.

However, becoming a successful transit hub requires more than geography. It demands infrastructure, customs efficiency, rail connectivity, port capacity, digital cargo tracking, competitive tariffs, banking channels, insurance availability and political stability. Iran has the geography, but it must constantly improve the institutional and infrastructural conditions needed for smooth transit. The INSTC will succeed only if Iran's hub role becomes reliable, predictable and commercially attractive.

Sanctions remain a serious constraint. International shippers, banks and insurers may hesitate to use Iranian routes because of compliance risks. This reduces cargo volumes and discourages private-sector participation. Yet

sanctions also paradoxically increase the value of alternative corridors for countries facing Western restrictions. Iran's hub role therefore exists within a paradox of *constraint and necessity*. It is restricted by sanctions but made strategically relevant by the same geopolitical fragmentation that sanctions represent.

In conclusion, Iran as a transit hub is the central operational reality of the INSTC. It connects India's maritime access with Eurasia's continental routes; it gives Iran economic and diplomatic relevance; it gives India a way around Pakistan; and it gives Central Asia a possible southern outlet. In the refined language of geoeconomics, Iran is the *transit heart of the North–South corridor*.

9.2.2 Iranian Ports and Railways

Iranian ports and railways form the physical foundation of Iran's role in the INSTC. Corridors do not function through diplomatic declarations alone; they require terminals, tracks, roads, cranes, customs facilities, warehouses, locomotives, ferry services, rolling stock, electronic documentation and border coordination. Iran's ports and railways are therefore not technical details; they are instruments of *corridor sovereignty* and *geostrategic utility*.

Bandar Abbas has historically been one of the most important Iranian ports for the INSTC because of its strong connection with Iran's national road and rail network. Located near the Strait of Hormuz, Bandar Abbas serves as a major commercial gateway for Iran. Cargo from India can arrive at Bandar Abbas by sea and then move northward through Iranian territory. The Bandar Abbas route has been one of the traditional operational imaginations of the INSTC, especially for movement toward Bandar-e-Anzali, the Caspian Sea, Astrakhan and Russia.

Chabahar, however, adds a special strategic dimension. Unlike Bandar Abbas, Chabahar is located on the Gulf of Oman, outside the innermost Persian Gulf. It is deeply connected with India's Afghanistan and Central Asia strategy. Chabahar can link India with Iran's eastern corridor, Afghanistan and potentially Central Asia. When Chabahar is integrated with the INSTC, it gives India an additional southern node. This enhances route flexibility. In strategic language, Chabahar adds *redundancy* and *resilience* to the corridor system.

Iran's Caspian ports are equally important. Bandar-e-Anzali and Amirabad are key Iranian gateways to the Caspian Sea. From these ports, cargo can move across the Caspian to Russian ports such as Astrakhan and Olya, and onward through Russian railways. This Caspian segment gives the INSTC its inland-maritime character. It allows the corridor to avoid complete dependence on overland routes and gives shippers multiple options depending on cost, time and political conditions.

Iranian railways are central to the corridor's future. Rail transport is essential for moving large volumes of cargo efficiently across long distances. Roads can support flexibility, but railways provide scale. Iran's rail links from southern ports to central and northern regions, and onward toward Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and the Caspian, determine the corridor's competitiveness. Without efficient railways, the INSTC may remain partly dependent on road movement, which can be slower and costlier for large cargo volumes.

The Rasht–Astara railway is one of the most discussed missing links in the western branch of the INSTC. Its completion would connect Iran's rail network more effectively with Azerbaijan and then Russia. This would create a more continuous rail route from the Persian Gulf and Iranian interior toward the Caucasus and Russia. The importance of Rasht–Astara lies in the fact that it reduces transshipment difficulties and strengthens the western corridor's operational coherence. It is therefore not just a railway; it is a *strategic connector*.

The eastern route through Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran also matters. This route links Central Asia with Iran and the Persian Gulf region. It is important for India because it creates a possible connection to Central Asian republics through Iran. The Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran rail connection strengthens the possibility of moving goods between Central Asia and Iranian ports. This gives landlocked Central Asia access to southern seas and gives India an opening into Central Asian markets.

The trans-Caspian route adds another option. Cargo can move through Iran to Caspian ports and then by ship across the Caspian Sea. This route may be useful when western or eastern land routes face bottlenecks. The existence of multiple branches is one of the INSTC's strengths. A corridor with several routes is more resilient than a corridor dependent on one line. Iran's ports and railways provide these options.

However, infrastructure gaps remain a serious challenge. Rail capacity, missing links, customs systems, port-handling efficiency, documentation delays, border coordination and cargo volumes require improvement. The INSTC will not become a major trade route merely because it appears shorter on a map. It must become commercially reliable. Traders select routes based on predictability, not only distance. Therefore, Iran's ports and railways must be modernized, integrated and digitally coordinated.

India has a strong interest in these improvements because Iran's infrastructure determines India's access to Eurasia. If Iranian ports are efficient and railways are connected, India gains a stronger route to Russia, Central Asia and Europe. If bottlenecks persist, the corridor's promise remains partially unrealized. Therefore, India–Iran cooperation must include technical dialogue, port management, logistics planning, customs facilitation and corridor promotion.

In conclusion, Iranian ports and railways are the practical machinery of the INSTC. Bandar Abbas, Chabahar, Bandar-e-Anzali, Amirabad, Rasht, Astara, Zahedan and other nodes together form Iran's corridor skeleton. The stronger this infrastructure becomes, the more valuable Iran becomes to India's Eurasian strategy. In the language of corridor geopolitics, Iran's ports are the *maritime gates*, its railways are the *continental arteries*, and the INSTC is the *circulatory system* of India–Iran–Eurasia connectivity.

9.2.3 Iran's Link With Eurasia

Iran's link with Eurasia is one of the deepest reasons for its importance in the INSTC. Eurasia is the enormous geopolitical space comprising Europe and Asia, including Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Caspian region and parts of West Asia. Iran is geographically embedded in this wider Eurasian system. It has borders and connections with the Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey and the Caspian region. This makes Iran a natural connector between the Indian Ocean world and Eurasian land routes.

Iran's Eurasian link is historical as well as geographical. For centuries, Persia was connected with Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, India and the Islamic world through trade, language, religion, empire and intellectual exchange. Persianate culture moved across Herat, Bukhara, Samarkand, Delhi, Isfahan and Tabriz. Merchants, poets, scholars, artisans and diplomats moved through these routes. The INSTC, in a modern form, reactivates this older

connectivity. It is not merely a new route; it is the contemporary infrastructure of an old civilizational geography.

Iran's Caspian access is central to its Eurasian role. The Caspian Sea links Iran with Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Through Caspian shipping and northern railways, Iran connects with Russian and Central Asian markets. This makes Iran a bridge between the southern seas and northern interiors. For India, Iran's Caspian link is valuable because it provides access to Russia and Central Asia without relying on routes through Pakistan or purely maritime routes around Europe.

Iran's connection with the Caucasus also matters. The western branch of the INSTC depends on links through Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia. The Caucasus is strategically sensitive because it connects Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea region. Iran's relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia, and its rail link toward Astara, influence the corridor's future. Thus, Iran's Eurasian role is also shaped by Caucasian geopolitics.

Iran's connection with Central Asia is equally important. Turkmenistan borders Iran and provides a direct land connection between Iran and Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are part of the broader Central Asian system that can benefit from southern routes. Central Asian states are landlocked and seek diversified corridors. Iran gives them access to ports and the Indian Ocean. For India, Iran gives access to these states. This makes Iran a *mutual gateway*—Central Asia's route south and India's route north.

Iran's Eurasian link has become more important because of contemporary geopolitical realignments. Russia's relations with the West have deteriorated sharply after the Ukraine conflict. Iran faces longstanding sanctions. Many states are seeking alternative corridors to reduce dependence on Western-controlled routes and vulnerable chokepoints. The INSTC, through Iran, becomes part of this new Eurasian search for *strategic logistics autonomy*. Iran's geography is thus increasingly politicized and increasingly valuable.

Iran's Eurasian role also supports India's multi-alignment. India has strong ties with Russia, growing engagement with Europe, important interests in Central Asia and historical relations with Iran. The INSTC allows India to connect these interests physically. It gives substance to India's multipolar

diplomacy. Without routes, multi-alignment remains diplomatic; with corridors, it becomes economic and strategic.

The link with Eurasia also enhances Iran's bargaining power. A state that controls or hosts important corridors becomes harder to isolate completely. Iran's energy resources already give it weight; its corridor geography gives it additional relevance. The more the INSTC develops, the more Iran becomes indispensable to India, Russia and Central Asian states. This is why Iran takes the corridor seriously: it converts geography into influence.

However, Iran's Eurasian link is affected by instability and competition. The South Caucasus is politically sensitive; Central Asia is influenced by Russia and China; sanctions affect Iranian infrastructure; and regional rivalry may slow cooperation. Iran must balance its relationships with Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, India, China and Central Asian states. Its Eurasian role is therefore powerful but complicated.

In conclusion, Iran's link with Eurasia makes it the natural heart of the INSTC. It connects the Indian Ocean to the Caspian, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia and Europe. It gives India access to the Eurasian heartland and gives Eurasian actors access to the Indian Ocean. In the refined vocabulary of geopolitics, Iran is the *Eurasian bridgehead of India's northward strategy*.

9.3 India's Interest in INSTC

India's interest in the INSTC is rooted in its desire for *strategic access, economic efficiency, supply-chain resilience, Eurasian engagement and connectivity autonomy*. India is a major economy with expanding trade, energy needs, industrial ambition and geopolitical aspirations. Such a country cannot remain dependent only on long maritime routes or politically obstructed land routes. The INSTC offers India an alternative pathway to Russia, Central Asia, the Caspian region and Europe through Iran. This makes it one of the most important connectivity projects in India's extended-neighbourhood policy.

India's interest is also shaped by Pakistan's denial of transit. India's direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is obstructed by Pakistan. The INSTC, especially when linked with Chabahar, gives India a route that bypasses this obstruction. It allows India to reach Eurasia through Iran. Thus, the corridor

is a practical answer to India's *continental access problem*. It gives India a route without dependence on Pakistan-controlled geography.

The corridor also strengthens India's relations with Iran and Russia. India and Russia have a long strategic partnership involving defence, nuclear energy, space, hydrocarbons and diplomacy. India and Iran have historical, cultural, energy and connectivity ties. The INSTC brings these relationships together in a single infrastructure framework. It creates a triangular logic of cooperation: India as market and maritime power, Iran as transit hub, and Russia as Eurasian destination and northern partner.

India's interest in the INSTC increased further because of global supply-chain disruptions. The Suez Canal blockage, Red Sea insecurity, sanctions, maritime-risk premiums and the Ukraine conflict have shown the vulnerability of overdependence on a limited number of routes. India needs diversified corridors to protect trade and strategic interests. The INSTC contributes to this diversification. It is part of India's larger movement from *route dependence* to *route plurality*.

India also sees the INSTC as a way to engage Central Asia. Central Asian republics are rich in energy, minerals, uranium and strategic potential. They also offer markets for Indian pharmaceuticals, textiles, machinery, food products, services and education. Yet India's trade with Central Asia has been limited by connectivity. INSTC-related routes through Iran can improve this situation. Thus, the corridor supports India's *Connect Central Asia* policy.

From a geopolitical point of view, the INSTC helps India participate in Eurasia without joining China-led connectivity models that raise sovereignty concerns. India has objected to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor because it passes through territory claimed by India. The INSTC provides India with an alternative connectivity framework based on its own partnerships. It allows India to be a participant in Eurasian connectivity without compromising national positions.

9.3.1 Shorter Trade Route to Russia and Europe

The most visible Indian interest in the INSTC is the possibility of a shorter trade route to Russia and Europe. Traditional cargo movement from India to Russia and northern Europe often travels through the Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Suez Canal, Mediterranean Sea and then onward to European or Russian destinations. This route is established but long. The INSTC offers a different

path: India to Iran by sea, Iran to the Caspian or Azerbaijan by road/rail, and onward to Russia and Europe through Caspian or rail networks. This route can reduce distance, time and cost if operationalized efficiently.

The shortened route matters because logistics costs directly affect trade competitiveness. If Indian goods take too long or cost too much to reach Eurasian markets, Indian exporters lose advantage. Pharmaceuticals, textiles, machinery, agricultural goods, engineering products and consumer items all become more competitive when freight costs decline. A shorter route is not simply a convenience; it is an economic instrument. It helps Indian industry reach distant markets with greater efficiency.

Russia is especially important for India. India–Russia relations are historically deep, covering defence, energy, nuclear cooperation, space, fertilizers, commodities and strategic diplomacy. The Ukraine conflict and Western sanctions have altered Russia’s external trade patterns, increasing Moscow’s interest in southern and eastern routes. The INSTC offers India a more direct corridor to Russian markets and Russian resources. This strengthens the economic dimension of a long-standing strategic partnership.

The route to Europe through the INSTC is also important, though politically more complex because of sanctions, Russia–West tensions and changing trade patterns. In its original imagination, the corridor was designed to connect India with northern Europe through Russia. Even if current geopolitical tensions complicate this aspect, the long-term logic remains significant. Corridors are built for decades, not only for immediate political cycles. A future easing of tensions could revive European relevance, while Russian and Eurasian trade can continue in the meantime.

The shorter route also reduces vulnerability to maritime chokepoints. The Suez Canal is one of the world’s most important trade passages, but the 2021 blockage demonstrated how a single incident can disrupt global commerce. The Red Sea crisis has further shown that maritime routes can become vulnerable to conflict. The INSTC offers an alternative that reduces exclusive dependence on the Suez route. It does not replace maritime trade, but it adds resilience.

The route’s multimodal character is strategically useful. Cargo can move by sea, rail, road and Caspian shipping. Different combinations can be used depending on political conditions, cost, cargo type and infrastructure

readiness. Such flexibility is important in a volatile world. A single-route system is fragile; a multi-route system is resilient. The INSTC gives India logistical flexibility.

However, the promise of a shorter route must be matched by operational efficiency. If customs delays, rail gaps, poor cargo handling or banking problems slow movement, the theoretical advantage may be reduced. A shorter distance on a map does not automatically mean faster delivery in reality. Therefore, India's interest is not merely in the existence of the INSTC, but in its modernization, digitisation and seamless operation.

The Rasht–Astara railway, Iranian port efficiency, Caspian shipping capacity, customs harmonization and Russian rail connectivity will all determine whether the route becomes truly competitive. India must therefore work with Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan and other partners to remove bottlenecks. The corridor's success depends on practical logistics as much as strategic enthusiasm.

In conclusion, the INSTC offers India a shorter and potentially cheaper route to Russia and Europe. This route can reduce transit time, improve export competitiveness, diversify supply chains and strengthen India's Eurasian outreach. In the refined language of trade strategy, the INSTC is the *northward commercial artery through which India seeks faster access to Eurasian markets*.

9.3.2 Economic Benefits

The economic benefits of the INSTC for India are extensive. The corridor can reduce transport costs, shorten delivery time, increase trade with Russia and Central Asia, improve export competitiveness, diversify supply chains, support logistics industries, connect Indian ports with Eurasian markets and enhance India's role in regional commerce. It is therefore not merely a strategic corridor; it is a potential *engine of geoeconomic expansion*.

The first economic benefit is cost reduction. High logistics costs are a major obstacle to international trade. If the INSTC reduces freight cost compared with traditional routes, Indian exporters can become more competitive. Lower logistics costs can help Indian pharmaceuticals, textiles, engineering goods, auto components, tea, rice, machinery, chemicals and consumer products enter Eurasian markets more effectively. Trade competitiveness often depends not only on production cost but also on transport cost.

The second benefit is time reduction. Faster delivery improves supply-chain reliability. Perishable goods, high-value products, pharmaceuticals, machinery parts and just-in-time cargo benefit from shorter transit periods. Reduced time also lowers inventory costs. Firms do not need to hold excessive stock if goods move predictably. Thus, time reduction translates into financial savings and business confidence.

The third benefit is market diversification. India seeks to expand exports beyond traditional markets. Russia, Central Asia, the Caspian region and parts of Europe offer opportunities. Central Asian states require pharmaceuticals, medical services, textiles, food products, machinery, education and technology. Russia requires goods and supplies under changing geopolitical conditions. The INSTC can help India access these markets more effectively.

The fourth benefit is import diversification. India can import fertilizers, energy-related products, minerals, metals, timber, pulses, chemicals and strategic resources from Eurasia. Kazakhstan's uranium, Central Asian minerals, Russian fertilizers and energy commodities, and other regional resources can support Indian industry and agriculture. A corridor that supports both exports and imports is more sustainable than one-directional trade.

The fifth benefit is supply-chain resilience. Global disruptions have shown that dependence on one route is risky. The INSTC provides India with another option. If maritime routes through Suez or Red Sea become disrupted, or if freight costs rise sharply, the INSTC can serve as an alternative. This gives Indian businesses and policymakers greater flexibility. Economic resilience is now a core element of national security.

The sixth benefit is port and logistics development in India. Increased use of the INSTC can strengthen Indian ports on the western coast, including Jawaharlal Nehru Port, Mumbai, Kandla, Mundra and other logistics hubs. It can encourage warehousing, freight forwarding, customs digitisation, container services and multimodal logistics. Thus, the corridor can stimulate India's domestic logistics ecosystem.

The seventh benefit is strengthening India–Iran economic ties. Iran's role as a transit hub means Indian companies, ports, shipping firms and logistics operators must engage Iranian institutions. This creates commercial contact beyond oil and culture. India–Iran trade can expand through corridor-related

goods, services, port operations, transport equipment and logistics. The INSTC therefore broadens the bilateral economic relationship.

The eighth benefit is strengthening India–Russia economic relations. India and Russia have set ambitious trade goals, but physical connectivity has remained a constraint. The INSTC can support growth in bilateral trade by improving cargo movement. It can also help India access Russian commodities and help Russia access Indian markets. In a period of changing global alignments, this economic route has strategic significance.

The ninth benefit is participation in Eurasian value chains. If the corridor matures, Indian companies can integrate more deeply with Eurasian production, processing and distribution networks. This may include pharmaceuticals, chemicals, food processing, machinery, energy services, fertilizers and metals. Connectivity makes investment more feasible because investors need reliable routes for inputs and outputs.

The tenth benefit is diplomatic-economic influence. A country that helps build and use corridors gains influence. India's participation in the INSTC signals that it is not only a consumer of connectivity but a creator of connectivity. This enhances India's image as a serious Eurasian actor. Economic corridors are instruments of soft power, commercial power and strategic power.

However, these benefits will materialize only if bottlenecks are addressed. Customs delays, incomplete rail links, sanctions, banking restrictions, insurance problems, low cargo volumes, documentation differences and political instability can reduce the corridor's attractiveness. India must therefore treat the INSTC as a long-term project requiring policy coordination, private-sector participation and diplomatic persistence.

The economic benefits are also linked with Chabahar. If Chabahar is integrated effectively into INSTC, India gains a stronger southern node and additional flexibility. Chabahar can support Central Asian outreach, while Bandar Abbas and other Iranian ports can support Russia and Caspian routes. Multiple Iranian entry points give India greater choice. Choice is the economic expression of strategic autonomy.

In conclusion, the INSTC offers India major economic benefits: lower cost, shorter time, diversified markets, import security, stronger logistics, greater resilience and deeper Eurasian engagement. It can transform India's trade

geography by linking the Indian Ocean with Iran, the Caspian, Russia and Central Asia. In the language of geoeconomics, the INSTC is the *commercial corridor through which India seeks to convert connectivity into competitiveness*.

Concluding Observation

Iran's role in the INSTC is central, not peripheral. It acts as a transit hub, provides ports and railways, links the Indian Ocean with the Caspian, and connects India with Eurasia. Without Iran, the INSTC cannot perform its essential north-south function. Iran's ports are the maritime gateways, its railways and roads are the inland arteries, and its Caspian connections are the northern bridges. For India, this makes Iran indispensable to continental connectivity.

India's interest in the INSTC is equally profound. The corridor offers a shorter route to Russia and Europe, supports trade with Central Asia, reduces dependence on traditional maritime routes, bypasses Pakistan's transit obstruction, and strengthens India's economic competitiveness. It also reinforces India's strategic autonomy by providing multiple routes in a fragmented global order. Thus, the INSTC is not merely a transport corridor; it is a *geostrategic instrument of Eurasian access, economic resilience and India–Iran cooperation*.

Chapter 10: Afghanistan Factor in India–Iran Geopolitics

Afghanistan occupies a profoundly consequential position in India–Iran geopolitics. It is not merely a neighbouring country of Iran or a distant strategic concern for India; it is a *geopolitical hinge*, a *civilizational corridor*, a *security-sensitive buffer*, and a *continental passageway* linking South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and the wider Eurasian interior. In the strategic imagination of both India and Iran, Afghanistan has never been an ordinary territorial space. It has been a route of commerce, a theatre of imperial contestation, a cradle of cultural transmission, a sanctuary and battleground for ideological movements, and a determining factor in regional security. Therefore, any serious analysis of India–Iran relations must give Afghanistan a central place.

Afghanistan is important because it lies at the intersection of several regional systems. To the west, it touches Iran and the Persianate cultural zone; to the east and south, it is linked with Pakistan and the Indian subcontinent; to the north, it opens toward Central Asia; and through historical routes, it connects with China, Russia and the wider Eurasian heartland. This geographical position has made Afghanistan both a bridge and a battlefield. When stable, Afghanistan can connect regions; when unstable, it can transmit insecurity. This dual character makes Afghanistan a shared strategic concern for India and Iran.

For India, Afghanistan is important because it affects regional balance, counter-terrorism, access to Central Asia, development diplomacy and the security of India's north-western strategic environment. India has historically viewed Afghanistan as a civilizational neighbour and strategic partner, even though there is no direct physical access because of Pakistan's intervening geography. India's investments in Afghan infrastructure, education, health, capacity building, humanitarian assistance and connectivity reflect a long-term desire to support an Afghanistan that is sovereign, stable, plural and not captured by forces hostile to India.

For Iran, Afghanistan is even more immediate because the two countries share a long border, historical-cultural linkages, linguistic affinities, refugee flows, water disputes, narcotics pressures and security concerns. Iran cannot distance itself from Afghan instability. Violence, migration, drugs, sectarian tension, border insecurity and water scarcity can move directly from Afghanistan into Iranian territory. Thus, Afghanistan is not merely part of Iran's foreign policy; it is part of Iran's domestic security environment. Iran's Afghanistan policy is therefore shaped by *border realism*.

India and Iran have often found convergence in Afghanistan, especially when both were concerned about extremist groups, Pakistan-backed influence and instability after the Taliban's rise in the 1990s. During that period, both India and Iran were broadly sympathetic to forces resisting Taliban domination. After 2001, both supported Afghanistan's reconstruction in different ways. After the Taliban's return in 2021, both countries had to adjust their policies pragmatically while continuing to worry about terrorism, minority rights, narcotics, refugee pressures and regional exclusion. Afghanistan therefore remains a continuous point of India–Iran dialogue.

In classical geopolitical language, Afghanistan resembles what Halford Mackinder in *The Geographical Pivot of History* might have called a space near the great continental interior, while Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace* would direct attention to Afghanistan's rimland significance between continental and maritime powers. Afghanistan is not a coastal state, but it affects coastal strategies because access to Afghanistan requires corridors such as Chabahar. It is landlocked, but it influences maritime India through the question of access. This is why Afghanistan links India's continental ambition with Iran's transit geography.

10.1 Afghanistan as a Shared Strategic Concern

Afghanistan is a shared strategic concern for India and Iran because instability in Afghanistan affects both countries, though in different ways. For India, Afghanistan represents a strategic frontier beyond Pakistan, a route to Central Asia, a partner in development, and a space vulnerable to anti-India extremist networks. For Iran, Afghanistan represents an immediate borderland, a refugee source, a water-sharing partner, a narcotics-transit zone and a cultural neighbour. These different concerns often converge around the

need for stability, inclusive governance, trade access and prevention of terrorism.

The phrase *shared strategic concern* does not mean that India and Iran have identical policies in Afghanistan. Their geographies, threat perceptions and diplomatic compulsions differ. India has no direct border with Afghanistan because Pakistan lies between them; Iran shares a direct border. India's concerns are more related to regional balance, terrorism, connectivity and development influence; Iran's concerns are more immediate, involving border management, refugees, water, narcotics and security. Yet both countries understand that an unstable Afghanistan can damage their interests. This creates a natural basis for consultation.

Afghanistan has historically been a place where regional powers project influence. Pakistan has sought strategic depth in Afghanistan; Iran has sought border security and protection of cultural and religious interests; Russia and Central Asian states have sought protection from extremist spillover; China has watched Afghanistan through the lenses of Xinjiang, minerals and regional connectivity; the United States and NATO once viewed Afghanistan through counter-terrorism and state-building. India's role has been distinctive because it emphasized development, institutions, infrastructure and goodwill. Iran's role has been shaped by proximity and necessity. Within this crowded strategic field, India and Iran have often discovered overlapping interests.

The Taliban question has repeatedly tested India–Iran cooperation. In the 1990s, Taliban rule created anxiety in both New Delhi and Tehran. For India, the Taliban's Pakistan links and anti-India extremist ecosystem were deeply troubling. For Iran, the Taliban's sectarian posture, violence against Shia communities and killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 created profound hostility. After 2021, both countries had to deal with a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan again, but with more caution, pragmatism and recognition of humanitarian realities. This shows how Afghanistan continuously compels India and Iran to combine principle with practicality.

Afghanistan is also central to Chabahar and the International North–South Transport Corridor. India's desire to reach Afghanistan without Pakistan makes Iran indispensable. Iran's Chabahar Port provides Afghanistan with an alternative outlet to the sea and gives India access to Afghan territory. Therefore, Afghanistan transforms India–Iran connectivity cooperation from a bilateral project into a regional strategy. Without Afghanistan, Chabahar

would still be important, but with Afghanistan it becomes strategically transformative.

Afghanistan's humanitarian crises also make it a shared concern. Food insecurity, displacement, poverty, collapse of institutions, restrictions on women, unemployment and international isolation have created immense distress among Afghans. India has repeatedly provided humanitarian aid; Iran has hosted large numbers of Afghan refugees for decades. Both countries therefore confront the human consequences of Afghan instability. In this sense, Afghanistan is not only a strategic issue but also a moral and humanitarian issue.

Narcotics trafficking further links India and Iran's concerns. Afghanistan has long been associated with opium production and trafficking networks. Iran, due to its border position, has borne a significant burden in counter-narcotics operations. India, too, is affected by drug trafficking routes and associated criminal networks. Narcotics weaken societies, finance insurgent and criminal organizations, and destabilize borders. Thus, counter-narcotics cooperation remains an important dimension of Afghanistan-related strategic thinking.

In conclusion, Afghanistan is a shared strategic concern because it connects India's external security and connectivity with Iran's immediate border security and domestic stability. It is a landlocked country, yet it influences maritime access; it is a poor country, yet it shapes great-power strategy; it is geographically constrained, yet it determines regional corridors. In the refined language of geopolitics, Afghanistan is the *continental crucible in which India–Iran strategic convergence is repeatedly tested*.

10.1.1 Geographical Position of Afghanistan

The geographical position of Afghanistan is the foundation of its strategic importance. Afghanistan is a landlocked country located at the meeting point of South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and the broader Eurasian landmass. It borders Iran to the west, Pakistan to the east and south, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north, and China through the narrow Wakhan Corridor in the north-east. This location gives Afghanistan the character of a *crossroads state*. It has no coastline, yet it touches multiple geopolitical regions.

Afghanistan's landlocked character is central to its destiny. A landlocked state depends on neighbouring countries for access to ports and international markets. This dependence can become a source of economic vulnerability and political pressure. Afghanistan's nearest access to the sea lies through Pakistan or Iran. Pakistan's ports have historically been important for Afghan trade, but political tensions and border closures have often disrupted commerce. Iran's Chabahar route therefore becomes crucial because it offers Afghanistan an alternative maritime outlet. This geographical need explains why Afghanistan is central to India–Iran connectivity cooperation.

Afghanistan's terrain also matters. The Hindu Kush mountains, high plateaus, deserts, river valleys and difficult passes have historically shaped movement, warfare and state authority. Geography has made Afghanistan hard to conquer fully and difficult to govern centrally. Mountainous terrain has provided refuge to tribes, insurgents and armed groups. At the same time, it has complicated infrastructure development, national integration and economic modernization. Therefore, Afghanistan's geography produces both resilience and fragmentation.

Afghanistan's position between empires gave it historic importance. In the nineteenth century, it became a buffer between British India and Tsarist Russia during the Great Game. In the twentieth century, it became a theatre of Cold War competition after the Soviet intervention of 1979. In the twenty-first century, it became central to the global war on terror after 2001 and to regional recalibration after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021. These repeated interventions show that Afghanistan's geography gives it significance beyond its economic size.

For India, Afghanistan's location is important because it lies beyond Pakistan and before Central Asia. It is the geographical door through which India can reach the Eurasian interior if access is available. But Pakistan blocks India's direct land route. Therefore, Afghanistan's location creates both desire and difficulty for India. India wants to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia, but the political geography of Pakistan obstructs this access. This is why Iran becomes strategically vital. Through Chabahar, India can reach Afghanistan from the west rather than through Pakistan.

For Iran, Afghanistan's location is immediate and unavoidable. Western Afghanistan, especially regions such as Herat and Nimroz, has deep historical and cultural connections with Iran. The Dari language, Persianate culture,

religious networks, trade communities and refugee movements connect both countries. Iran's eastern provinces are affected by developments across the Afghan border. Water flows, migration, smuggling, narcotics trafficking and security threats all cross this frontier. Afghanistan's geography thus enters Iran's internal policy calculations.

Afghanistan's northern position also links it with Central Asia. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan share ethnic, linguistic, economic and security connections with Afghanistan. Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen are part of Afghanistan's social fabric. Instability in northern Afghanistan can affect Central Asia; stability can revive north-south trade. This makes Afghanistan a potential bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. Chabahar and Iran can strengthen this bridging role by providing a southern outlet.

The Wakhan Corridor gives Afghanistan a narrow connection to China, though difficult terrain limits its practical role. Nevertheless, the presence of this corridor reminds us that Afghanistan touches not only South and Central Asia but also China's western frontier. This explains Chinese interest in Afghan stability, especially in relation to Xinjiang, terrorism and mineral resources. Afghanistan's geography therefore links Indian, Iranian, Russian, Chinese, Pakistani and Central Asian interests in a single difficult space.

Afghanistan's geographical position may therefore be described as *central but constrained*. It is central because it lies among important regions; it is constrained because mountains, landlockedness, political instability and external rivalries limit its ability to become a stable corridor. India and Iran seek to transform Afghanistan from a zone of conflict into a zone of connectivity, but this transformation remains difficult.

In conclusion, Afghanistan's geographical position makes it indispensable in India-Iran geopolitics. It is landlocked, mountainous, corridor-shaped and regionally central. It links Iran with Central Asia and South Asia; it links India's aspirations with Eurasian access; and it links regional security with global strategy. Afghanistan's geography is therefore not passive background; it is an active force shaping India-Iran cooperation.

10.1.2 India's Interest in Afghanistan

India's interest in Afghanistan is rooted in history, security, connectivity, development and regional balance. India and Afghanistan have shared civilizational contacts through Buddhism, trade, Sanskritic and Persianate

exchanges, Sufi networks, migration, poetry, music, food, architecture and political interaction. Afghanistan was not historically alien to the Indian world; it was one of the great passages through which people and ideas moved between India, Iran and Central Asia. This cultural memory gives India's Afghan policy a deeper emotional and historical foundation.

The first major Indian interest in Afghanistan is security. Afghanistan has repeatedly been used by extremist organizations and external actors in ways that threaten India. The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, the presence of Pakistan-supported networks, and the use of Afghan territory or Afghan-linked networks for militancy created grave concern in India. India's security interest is therefore clear: Afghanistan should not become a sanctuary for anti-India terrorism. A stable and sovereign Afghanistan is essential for India's national security.

The second Indian interest is regional balance. Pakistan has long sought influence in Afghanistan as part of its strategic depth doctrine. India opposes any situation in which Afghanistan becomes an extension of Pakistan's security establishment or a base for anti-India forces. India's engagement with Afghanistan is therefore partly designed to support Afghan sovereignty and prevent monopolistic external control. India's preferred Afghanistan is independent, plural and regionally balanced.

The third Indian interest is development diplomacy. India has invested heavily in Afghan reconstruction since 2001. Its projects have included roads, electricity transmission, dams, hospitals, schools, scholarships, capacity building, the Afghan Parliament building and community-development projects. India's approach has generally emphasized institution-building and people-centric development rather than military occupation. This has generated goodwill among many Afghans. Development has been India's most effective instrument of influence.

The fourth Indian interest is connectivity. Afghanistan is the land bridge between South Asia and Central Asia, but Pakistan blocks India's direct land access. Through Chabahar in Iran and road networks toward Afghanistan, India seeks to overcome this blockage. Afghanistan is thus central to India's continental strategy. Without access to Afghanistan, India's Central Asia policy remains limited. With access through Iran, India can imagine a broader Eurasian presence. Therefore, Afghanistan is the *geographical vestibule of India's Central Asian ambition*.

The fifth Indian interest is trade. Afghanistan is a market for Indian pharmaceuticals, medical services, tea, textiles, machinery, food products and educational services. Afghanistan exports dry fruits, saffron, carpets, medicinal plants and agricultural goods that have demand in India. Trade between India and Afghanistan is not only economic; it strengthens social and diplomatic bonds. Chabahar can help this trade bypass Pakistan's constraints.

The sixth Indian interest is humanitarian. Afghanistan's people have suffered war, displacement, poverty, drought and institutional collapse. India has provided food aid, medicines, vaccines, scholarships and medical assistance. Humanitarian support serves both moral and strategic purposes. It demonstrates India's goodwill while preventing Afghanistan's complete humanitarian breakdown. In international relations, humanitarian action can also be a form of *ethical statecraft*.

The seventh Indian interest is cultural influence. Indian cinema, education, medicine, music, sports and scholarship have historically been popular among Afghans. India's soft power in Afghanistan is significant because it is not perceived by many Afghans as coercive. Educational scholarships and medical treatment in India have created lasting people-to-people ties. Such soft power strengthens India's long-term position even when political circumstances change.

The Taliban's return in 2021 forced India to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy. India had invested heavily in the previous Afghan republic, and the sudden change created uncertainty. However, India did not abandon the Afghan people. It continued humanitarian engagement and gradually reopened limited diplomatic channels to protect its interests. This reflects India's pragmatic approach: non-recognition or caution toward the regime does not mean disengagement from society.

India's interest in Afghanistan is therefore both strategic and humanitarian. India seeks security from terrorism, access to Central Asia, balance against Pakistan-backed influence, trade opportunities, cultural goodwill and support for Afghan people. Iran becomes important because it provides India with a route into Afghanistan and shares concerns about extremism, narcotics and instability. Thus, India's Afghanistan policy and Iran policy intersect naturally.

In conclusion, India's interest in Afghanistan is a composite of *security anxiety, civilizational affinity, developmental commitment, connectivity ambition and strategic balancing*. Afghanistan is not a peripheral issue for India; it is a decisive theatre in India's north-western strategy. In the refined language of foreign policy, Afghanistan is India's *continental gateway and strategic warning zone*.

10.1.3 Iran's Interest in Afghanistan

Iran's interest in Afghanistan is immediate, deep and multidimensional. Unlike India, Iran shares a direct border with Afghanistan, which makes Afghan developments inseparable from Iran's domestic and external security. Afghanistan affects Iran through refugees, water, narcotics, border security, trade, sectarian issues, cultural ties and regional diplomacy. Therefore, Afghanistan is not a distant foreign-policy subject for Tehran; it is an intimate borderland concern.

The first Iranian interest is border security. Iran's eastern frontier with Afghanistan passes through sensitive regions where smuggling, illegal migration, narcotics trafficking and militant movement have posed long-term challenges. Any instability in Afghanistan can create direct pressure on Iranian border provinces. Iran therefore seeks an Afghanistan that can control its territory, regulate borders and prevent hostile or criminal networks from operating freely. Border security is the foundation of Iran's Afghanistan policy.

The second Iranian interest is refugees. Iran has hosted Afghan refugees for more than four decades. Waves of refugees entered Iran after the Soviet invasion, civil war, Taliban rule, U.S.-led intervention, economic collapse and the Taliban's return in 2021. Hosting refugees has humanitarian significance, but it also creates economic, social and political pressures, especially under sanctions. Iran's Afghanistan policy must therefore manage the difficult question of refugee protection, legal status, labour markets, return, documentation and international burden sharing. Refugees make Afghanistan a domestic political issue for Iran.

The third Iranian interest is water, especially the Helmand River. The Helmand water issue is a recurring source of tension between Iran and Afghanistan. Iran's Sistan region depends on water flows connected with Afghan rivers, and drought has intensified the dispute. Iran wants

Afghanistan to respect water-sharing arrangements and ensure adequate flow. Afghanistan, facing its own water and development needs, often views water as a sovereign resource. Thus, water makes Afghanistan a matter of environmental security for Iran. In an age of climate stress, water can become as strategic as oil.

The fourth Iranian interest is narcotics control. Afghanistan has long been associated with opium production and trafficking. Iran lies on routes used by traffickers moving narcotics toward West Asia and Europe. Iranian security forces have spent enormous resources combating drug trafficking, and Iranian society has suffered from addiction and drug-related crime. Therefore, Iran's interest in Afghanistan includes the prevention of narcotics production, trafficking and criminal networks. Afghanistan's drug economy directly affects Iran's internal security.

The fifth Iranian interest is cultural and linguistic. Iran and Afghanistan share deep Persianate connections. Dari, one of Afghanistan's major languages, is closely connected with Persian. Cities such as Herat have historically been part of the Persianate cultural world. Literature, poetry, religion, art and social traditions link both societies. This cultural proximity gives Iran influence but also responsibility. Iran cannot treat Afghanistan as an alien space; it sees parts of Afghanistan as culturally proximate.

The sixth Iranian interest is religious and sectarian. Iran has historically shown concern for Afghanistan's Shia communities, especially the Hazara population, which has faced persecution from extremist groups. Iran's policy toward Afghanistan has often been influenced by concern for Shia security, though Tehran has also engaged Sunni and Taliban actors pragmatically. This combination of ideological concern and strategic pragmatism is characteristic of Iranian diplomacy.

The seventh Iranian interest is trade and connectivity. Afghanistan is a market for Iranian fuel, food products, construction materials, electricity, consumer goods and services. Iran's ports, especially Chabahar, can provide Afghanistan with access to the sea. This makes Afghanistan economically relevant to Iran. If Afghanistan becomes stable, Iran can benefit from transit trade linking Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. Thus, Iran views Afghanistan not only as a security problem but also as a connectivity opportunity.

The eighth Iranian interest is limiting hostile external influence. Iran has historically been suspicious of U.S., Pakistani, Saudi and extremist influence in Afghanistan. During the U.S. military presence, Iran opposed permanent American strategic entrenchment near its borders. After the U.S. withdrawal, Iran remains concerned about instability, extremist groups and Pakistan's role. Tehran wants an Afghanistan that does not become a base for hostile operations against Iran. This is a core strategic concern.

Iran's policy after the Taliban's return in 2021 has been pragmatic. Iran has not fully embraced the Taliban ideologically, but it has engaged Taliban authorities on border security, water, refugees, trade and diplomatic management. This pragmatic engagement is driven by necessity. A neighbour cannot ignore the authority controlling territory across the border. Thus, Iran's Afghanistan policy is an example of *compulsory engagement*.

Iran's interest in Afghanistan also intersects with India's interest. Both countries want stability, oppose extremist spillover, value Chabahar's role, and recognize Afghanistan's importance for Central Asian access. However, Iran's direct border concerns make its policy more immediate, while India's concerns are filtered through Pakistan, terrorism and connectivity. The overlap is significant, but not identical.

In conclusion, Iran's interest in Afghanistan is shaped by *border security, refugee management, water rights, counter-narcotics, cultural proximity, Shia protection, trade, connectivity and regional balance*. Afghanistan affects Iran more directly than almost any other regional issue. In the refined language of geopolitics, Afghanistan is Iran's *eastern strategic frontier and humanitarian-security burden*.

Concluding Observation

Afghanistan is one of the most important connecting factors in India–Iran geopolitics. Its geography places it between South Asia, Central Asia and Iran. Its instability affects terrorism, narcotics, refugees, trade, water and regional balance. Its landlocked position makes Chabahar and Iranian routes strategically important. For India, Afghanistan is a gateway to Central Asia, a developmental partner, a counter-terrorism concern and a theatre of regional balance. For Iran, Afghanistan is a borderland of security, refugees, water, narcotics and cultural proximity.

India and Iran do not have identical Afghanistan policies, but they have significant areas of convergence. Both prefer stability over chaos, connectivity over isolation, and regional cooperation over Pakistan-dominated transit dependence. Both have used pragmatic diplomacy to protect their interests under difficult circumstances. In the broader architecture of India–Iran relations, Afghanistan is therefore not a side issue; it is a *shared strategic theatre* where geography, security, humanitarian responsibility and connectivity come together.

10.2 India–Iran Cooperation After 2001

India–Iran cooperation after 2001 acquired renewed strategic relevance because the fall of the first Taliban regime created a new opportunity for Afghanistan’s reconstruction, regional stabilization and connectivity-based diplomacy. The United States-led intervention removed the Taliban from Kabul, but the deeper question was not merely regime change; it was whether Afghanistan could be rebuilt as a stable, sovereign and regionally connected state. India and Iran, despite their different strategic cultures and diplomatic compulsions, shared an interest in preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a sanctuary of extremism, narcotics, sectarian violence and Pakistan-dominated strategic manipulation. Thus, Afghanistan became a *zone of India–Iran convergence*.

The post-2001 period created an unusual diplomatic situation. India was one of Afghanistan’s major development partners, while Iran was Afghanistan’s immediate western neighbour with deep historical, linguistic, commercial and security connections. India possessed financial, technical and developmental capacity; Iran possessed geography, border access and transit relevance. Their interests converged most visibly in the idea that Afghanistan must not remain landlocked in political helplessness. Afghanistan required infrastructure, roads, ports, markets, electricity, education, healthcare and stable institutions. India and Iran could contribute to this reconstruction through different but complementary means.

India–Iran cooperation after 2001 was also shaped by shared concern about Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan. During the Taliban’s first rule, Pakistan’s role in supporting the Taliban had deeply worried both New Delhi and Tehran. India feared anti-India terrorism and strategic encirclement; Iran feared sectarian extremism, border insecurity and hostile Sunni radicalism

near its eastern frontier. After 2001, both countries saw an opportunity to support a more plural, balanced and internationally connected Afghanistan. This did not mean that India and Iran had identical policies, but it produced a powerful *strategic overlap*.

The most important practical expression of this cooperation was connectivity. India's inability to access Afghanistan through Pakistan made Iran indispensable. Iran's Chabahar Port and road networks offered India a route into Afghanistan from the west. India's construction of the Zaranj–Delaram road inside Afghanistan further strengthened this route by connecting the Iranian border with Afghanistan's internal road system. In this way, India's infrastructure diplomacy and Iran's geography created a shared pathway into Afghanistan.

This cooperation also had a humanitarian dimension. Afghanistan after 2001 required food, medicine, education, capacity building, roads and institutional support. India provided extensive assistance, while Iran hosted refugees, managed border trade and maintained economic links with western Afghanistan. The Chabahar route later became particularly important for humanitarian supplies. Thus, Afghanistan was not merely a site of strategic competition; it was also a field of *developmental responsibility*.

10.2.1 Post-Taliban Reconstruction

Post-Taliban reconstruction after 2001 was one of the most important phases in Afghanistan's modern history. The collapse of Taliban rule opened the possibility of rebuilding a state devastated by Soviet intervention, civil war, Taliban authoritarianism, terrorism, economic collapse and institutional fragmentation. Reconstruction required roads, schools, hospitals, power lines, dams, administrative buildings, training institutions, democratic structures and humanitarian relief. India became one of the most visible regional contributors to this reconstruction process.

India's reconstruction policy in Afghanistan was based on the principle that development could support stability. New Delhi understood that a secure Afghanistan could not be created only through military force; it required roads, education, healthcare, livelihoods and institutions. India therefore avoided sending combat troops and instead built influence through *developmental statecraft*. This approach helped India gain goodwill among

ordinary Afghans because Indian assistance was seen as people-oriented rather than occupation-oriented.

Iran's role in post-Taliban reconstruction was different but equally significant. Iran had direct geographical access, linguistic-cultural proximity and deep ties with western Afghanistan, especially Herat and surrounding regions. Iran contributed through trade, electricity, fuel, border commerce, refugee management and reconstruction-related engagement. For Tehran, a stable Afghanistan was necessary to prevent refugee surges, narcotics trafficking, extremist spillover and border insecurity. Therefore, Iran's reconstruction interest was partly humanitarian, partly economic and partly defensive.

India and Iran found practical convergence in supporting a non-Taliban, reconstruction-oriented Afghanistan. Both were concerned that extremist forces should not regain domination. Both wanted Afghanistan to have diversified external relations. Both recognized that Pakistan's monopoly over Afghan transit and strategic life would be harmful to regional balance. This convergence produced cooperation around connectivity and infrastructure, even if broader regional politics remained complex.

The reconstruction phase also gave India–Iran cooperation a positive diplomatic character. Instead of being defined only by sanctions, energy and U.S.–Iran tensions, the relationship could be framed through Afghanistan's development. Chabahar, Zaranj–Delaram and humanitarian assistance became symbols of constructive regional engagement. Afghanistan allowed India and Iran to speak the language of *stability, development and access*.

Yet post-Taliban reconstruction was never easy. The insurgency revived, corruption weakened institutions, external powers pursued conflicting agendas, and Pakistan-linked sanctuaries undermined Afghan stability. India's projects faced security risks, including attacks on Indian personnel and missions. Iran also faced risks from narcotics, refugees and anti-Iranian extremist groups. Reconstruction therefore became a long and difficult process rather than a linear success story.

In conclusion, post-Taliban reconstruction created one of the most important periods of India–Iran convergence in Afghanistan. India provided development capacity and political support; Iran provided geographical access and regional influence. Their cooperation reflected the belief that

Afghanistan's future should be built through connectivity, institutions and inclusive development rather than extremism and coercion. In refined geopolitical language, post-2001 Afghanistan became the *developmental theatre of India–Iran strategic convergence*.

10.2.2 Infrastructure and Aid

Infrastructure and aid formed the core of India's post-2001 engagement in Afghanistan. India's development partnership extended across roads, electricity, health, education, agriculture, capacity building, scholarships, community projects and institutional reconstruction. The purpose was to help Afghanistan regain the basic material foundations of statehood and society. Afghanistan needed not only political agreements but also physical infrastructure. Without roads, electricity, schools, hospitals and administrative buildings, sovereignty remains fragile.

One of India's most important infrastructure contributions was the Zaranj–Delaram road. This road connected Zaranj near the Iran–Afghanistan border with Delaram on Afghanistan's ring-road network. Its strategic significance was immense because it linked Afghanistan's internal transport system with the Iranian route leading toward Chabahar. The road thus became a vital element of India's access strategy. It was not merely an Afghan road; it was a *geopolitical connector* linking India, Iran and Afghanistan through infrastructure.

India's aid also included landmark projects such as the Afghan Parliament building, the Salma Dam—officially the Afghan–India Friendship Dam—power transmission lines, schools, hospitals, buses, training programmes, scholarships and community development projects. These initiatives gave India a powerful development-oriented image in Afghanistan. They also reflected India's belief that influence gained through public welfare is more durable than influence gained through coercion.

Iran's infrastructure and aid role was shaped by proximity. Iran maintained trade and transport links with western Afghanistan, supplied energy and fuel, supported reconstruction in areas of cultural proximity, and managed refugee-related burdens. Iran's roads and ports were also part of Afghanistan's external economic life. In this sense, Iran's infrastructure role was both internal and external: it supported Afghan border regions and provided Afghanistan with an outlet to the sea.

India–Iran cooperation around infrastructure was especially visible in the Chabahar–Zaranj–Delaram logic. Chabahar provided the port; Iran provided the route; Zaranj–Delaram provided Afghan internal linkage; India provided investment and developmental commitment. Together, these elements formed an alternative to Pakistan-dominated transit. This was infrastructure as strategy, or what may be called *corridor diplomacy*.

Humanitarian aid was equally significant. India supplied wheat, medicines, vaccines and other essential items to Afghanistan, especially during periods of crisis. Chabahar later became an important route for such assistance. Humanitarian aid strengthened India's image as a reliable friend of the Afghan people and gave India's regional policy a moral dimension. Iran's territory and port access made such delivery possible when Pakistan routes were difficult or politically constrained.

Infrastructure and aid also created soft power. Afghan students studying in India, patients receiving medical treatment, officials receiving training, and communities benefiting from Indian projects became part of a wider people-to-people relationship. This soft power was important because it survived political change. Even when regimes changed in Kabul, India's developmental reputation retained value among many Afghans.

However, aid and infrastructure faced difficulties after the Taliban's return in 2021. Many projects entered uncertainty; direct institutional cooperation became complicated; and India had to recalibrate its presence. Yet the memory and material value of Indian projects did not disappear. Roads, dams, institutions and educational links continued to represent India's long-term commitment. Infrastructure outlives political cycles.

In conclusion, infrastructure and aid were central to India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan after 2001 because they gave physical and humanitarian substance to shared strategic concerns. India built and assisted; Iran connected and hosted; Afghanistan benefited from routes and projects. This combination transformed regional diplomacy into *developmental geopolitics*.

10.2.3 Chabahar Route to Afghanistan

The Chabahar route to Afghanistan is one of the most important pillars of India–Iran cooperation. It emerged from the strategic necessity of bypassing Pakistan and providing Afghanistan with an alternative outlet to the sea. Since Pakistan has denied India normal overland access to Afghanistan, India

required another route. Iran's Chabahar Port provided that alternative. Through Chabahar, Indian cargo could move by sea to Iran and then onward by road or rail toward Afghanistan.

The importance of Chabahar lies in its ability to convert India's maritime strength into continental access. India is geographically separated from Afghanistan by Pakistan-controlled land routes, but it can reach Iran by sea. From Iran, Afghanistan becomes accessible through the western corridor. Thus, Chabahar changes India's Afghan geography. It allows India to approach Afghanistan from the west rather than remain blocked from the east. This is *geographical re-engineering through diplomacy*.

For Afghanistan, Chabahar provides economic diversification. A landlocked country that depends too heavily on one neighbour for sea access becomes vulnerable to pressure. Pakistan's ports and border crossings have often been essential for Afghan trade, but political tensions and closures have repeatedly exposed Afghan vulnerability. Chabahar gives Afghanistan another route. It reduces transit monopoly and supports economic sovereignty.

The Chabahar route has also been used for humanitarian supplies. India's shipment of wheat to Afghanistan through Chabahar demonstrated that the port could function not merely as a strategic asset but also as a relief corridor. This humanitarian use gave Chabahar moral legitimacy. A route that carries food and medicine acquires a special diplomatic character. It becomes a corridor of *compassionate connectivity*.

The route also supports trade. Afghan products such as dry fruits, saffron, carpets and agricultural goods can reach India through Chabahar, while Indian pharmaceuticals, tea, rice, machinery and medical supplies can reach Afghanistan. This creates the possibility of two-way commercial movement. Trade is vital because it gives connectivity projects economic durability beyond political symbolism.

The Chabahar route also gives Iran a central role. Iran becomes the transit state connecting India and Afghanistan. This strengthens Iran's regional importance and supports development of its south-eastern region. It also allows Iran to present itself as a constructive regional actor despite sanctions and diplomatic pressure. Therefore, Chabahar serves Iranian interests as well as Indian and Afghan interests.

The route's strategic significance increased after the Taliban's return because Pakistan–Afghanistan tensions and border closures continued to affect Afghan trade. Alternative routes through Iran became more valuable as Afghan traders sought diversification. India's willingness to keep Chabahar relevant showed that the route remains important even under changed political circumstances in Kabul.

Nevertheless, the Chabahar route faces challenges. Sanctions on Iran complicate banking and insurance. Afghanistan's political status creates diplomatic uncertainty. Security risks affect transport. Infrastructure gaps slow cargo movement. Commercial volume remains below potential. These problems require sustained India–Iran coordination and practical improvement in customs, logistics and transport systems.

In conclusion, the Chabahar route to Afghanistan is the most concrete expression of India–Iran cooperation after 2001. It bypasses Pakistan, supports Afghan trade, enables humanitarian assistance, strengthens Iran's transit role and gives India strategic access. In the elevated language of regional geopolitics, Chabahar is the *western corridor through which India's Afghan policy becomes logistically possible*.

10.3 Taliban Return and New Challenges

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 created a new and difficult phase in India–Iran geopolitics concerning Afghanistan. The collapse of the Afghan republic, the withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces, and the re-establishment of Taliban control altered the regional balance. India had invested deeply in the previous Afghan state, while Iran had maintained complex relations with multiple Afghan actors, including pragmatic contacts with the Taliban. Both countries were forced to recalibrate their policies under conditions of uncertainty.

The Taliban return created a contradiction for India and Iran. On the one hand, neither country could ignore the authority controlling Kabul. On the other hand, both had serious concerns. India worried about terrorism, Pakistan-backed influence, anti-India groups and the safety of its development legacy. Iran worried about refugees, border security, water disputes, Shia communities, narcotics trafficking and extremist threats. Therefore, both countries had to practise *pragmatic caution*.

The new situation also affected Chabahar and connectivity. Afghanistan's political uncertainty complicated trade, investment and international engagement. Yet the need for alternative routes did not disappear. In fact, Afghanistan's economic isolation and Pakistan-route vulnerabilities made Chabahar even more relevant. India and Iran therefore faced the task of keeping connectivity alive without conferring unconditional legitimacy on Taliban rule.

The Taliban return also raised humanitarian concerns. Afghanistan faced economic collapse, food insecurity, restrictions on women and girls, international sanctions, reduced aid flows and institutional fragility. India continued humanitarian assistance, while Iran faced increased refugee and border pressures. Afghanistan's crisis became not only a strategic problem but also a humanitarian emergency for the region.

10.3.1 Security Concerns

Security concerns after the Taliban's return have been central to India–Iran geopolitics. For India, the most serious concern is that Afghan territory may again become a sanctuary for terrorist groups hostile to India. The historical association between Taliban networks, Pakistan-based groups and anti-India terrorism continues to shape Indian perceptions. New Delhi fears that instability in Afghanistan could embolden extremist organizations, radicalize networks and create pressure on Jammu and Kashmir or other Indian security interests.

India is also concerned about Pakistan's influence in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. If Afghanistan becomes strategically dependent on Pakistan, India's regional position weakens. Pakistan has historically sought influence in Kabul to gain strategic depth against India. The Taliban's return therefore revived old anxieties in New Delhi. India's challenge is to remain engaged with the Afghan people while preventing its adversaries from monopolizing Afghanistan's external orientation.

For Iran, security concerns are more immediate because of the shared border. Iran worries about militant infiltration, border clashes, narcotics trafficking, smuggling, extremist ideology and threats to Shia communities. The Taliban's ideological background and history of sectarian violence continue to create suspicion in Tehran, even though Iran has developed pragmatic

channels with Taliban authorities. Iran must manage security through engagement, deterrence and border control.

The presence of extremist groups such as Islamic State-Khorasan Province has increased regional anxiety. ISKP has targeted Shias, minorities, Taliban authorities and civilians, and it poses threats beyond Afghanistan. India and Iran both view transnational jihadist groups as dangers. For Iran, attacks on Shia communities are especially alarming; for India, the possibility of extremist networks linking with anti-India actors is a major concern. Thus, counter-terrorism remains a shared strategic priority.

Narcotics trafficking is another security concern. Afghanistan's drug economy has historically affected Iran, Central Asia and beyond. Iran has borne a heavy burden in counter-narcotics operations because trafficking routes pass through or near its territory. Changes in Taliban drug policies, including crackdowns on opium cultivation, have altered trafficking patterns but not eliminated the drug problem. Synthetic drugs and methamphetamine networks have added new complexities. This keeps Afghanistan central to Iran's internal security.

Security concerns also affect connectivity. Traders and transporters require safe roads, predictable checkpoints and functioning institutions. If Afghanistan remains unstable, Chabahar's Afghan route cannot reach full potential. Security is therefore an economic requirement. A corridor cannot function if cargo faces violence, extortion or administrative uncertainty. Thus, Afghanistan's security situation directly affects India–Iran connectivity cooperation.

India and Iran also need intelligence and diplomatic consultation on Afghanistan. Their threat perceptions are not identical, but they overlap enough to justify regular dialogue. Both countries need to monitor extremist groups, Pakistan's role, narcotics, refugee flows and border developments. Afghanistan is too important to be handled through isolated national policies. It requires regional consultation.

In conclusion, Taliban rule has created serious security concerns for both India and Iran. India worries about terrorism and Pakistan-backed influence; Iran worries about borders, refugees, narcotics, Shia security and extremist spillover. These concerns make Afghanistan a continuing strategic issue in

India–Iran relations. In the language of security studies, Afghanistan after 2021 is a *volatile frontier of convergent anxieties*.

10.3.2 Refugee and Border Issues for Iran

Refugee and border issues are among Iran's most serious Afghanistan-related concerns after the Taliban's return. Iran has hosted Afghan refugees for decades, beginning with the Soviet invasion, continuing through civil war and Taliban rule, and intensifying after economic collapse and political uncertainty. The Taliban's return in 2021 produced new movements of Afghans seeking safety, livelihood and stability. For Iran, this created humanitarian responsibility as well as economic and political strain.

Iran's refugee burden is substantial because many Afghans live in Iranian cities, work in informal sectors, and require access to education, healthcare, documentation and legal protection. Hosting refugees under sanctions and economic pressure is difficult. Iran's economy faces inflation, unemployment, currency pressure and international restrictions. Under such conditions, Afghan migration becomes a domestic political issue. Refugees are not only a humanitarian category; they are part of Iran's labour, security and social policy.

Border management is equally important. Iran's eastern border with Afghanistan is vulnerable to illegal crossings, smuggling, narcotics trafficking and occasional armed tension. The Taliban's control over Afghan border areas has required Iran to establish working mechanisms with Taliban authorities even without full ideological trust. This is an example of *compulsory neighbourly pragmatism*: Iran must deal with whoever controls the other side of the border.

Water disputes intensify border tensions. The Helmand River issue has periodically created friction between Iran and Afghanistan. Iran's Sistan region depends on water flows, while Afghanistan seeks to use water for its own development. Drought, climate change and poor water management make the issue more sensitive. For Iran, Afghan water policy is not a remote environmental question; it is a matter of local survival, agriculture and social stability.

The refugee issue also intersects with security. Large undocumented populations can become vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, crime, radicalization or political suspicion. This does not mean refugees are

inherently a threat; rather, unmanaged displacement creates insecurity for both refugees and host societies. Iran's challenge is to protect humanitarian principles while maintaining border control and domestic stability.

Iran's border concerns also include narcotics. Afghanistan-origin drugs have long moved through regional routes, and Iran has been one of the countries most affected. Border forces, police and anti-narcotics agencies face constant pressure. Drug trafficking damages Iranian society, fuels organized crime and imposes heavy security costs. Therefore, border control is inseparable from counter-narcotics strategy.

The Taliban's return has complicated refugee return. Iran has at times sought to repatriate undocumented Afghans, but Afghanistan's economic weakness and limited absorption capacity make mass return difficult. Returns under pressure can worsen humanitarian conditions inside Afghanistan. This creates a dilemma: Iran wants to reduce domestic burden, but Afghanistan may not be able to receive returnees safely and sustainably. The refugee question therefore requires international burden sharing.

For India, Iran's refugee and border issues matter because they affect regional stability and Chabahar's functioning. If Iran's eastern border is unstable, the Chabahar–Afghanistan corridor faces difficulty. If Afghan refugee crises intensify, Iran's policy may become more defensive. If water and border clashes increase, regional cooperation suffers. Therefore, Iran's Afghan border concerns are indirectly connected with India's connectivity strategy.

India can support stability by continuing humanitarian assistance to Afghans and by coordinating with Iran on Chabahar-related access. India does not share Iran's refugee burden directly, but it shares the consequence of Afghan instability. A collapsed Afghanistan creates terrorism, migration, narcotics and regional insecurity. Therefore, India has an interest in policies that reduce humanitarian pressure on Afghanistan's neighbours.

In conclusion, refugee and border issues make Afghanistan an immediate security and humanitarian concern for Iran. The Taliban's return intensified migration pressures, border uncertainty, water disputes and narcotics challenges. Iran must manage these issues through diplomacy, enforcement, humanitarian policy and regional coordination. In the refined vocabulary of geopolitics, Afghanistan is Iran's *eastern borderland of humanitarian strain and security vigilance*.

Concluding Observation

India–Iran cooperation after 2001 was shaped by the shared desire to stabilize Afghanistan, support reconstruction and prevent extremist domination. India contributed development assistance, infrastructure and humanitarian support; Iran provided geographical access, border connectivity and transit relevance. The Chabahar route became the most important symbol of this cooperation because it linked India, Iran and Afghanistan through a practical alternative to Pakistan-controlled routes.

The Taliban's return in 2021 created new difficulties. India faces renewed security concerns regarding terrorism and Pakistan-backed influence. Iran faces direct pressure through refugees, border security, water disputes and narcotics trafficking. Yet these challenges do not reduce Afghanistan's importance in India–Iran geopolitics. They make cooperation even more necessary. Afghanistan remains the *shared strategic theatre* where India's continental aspirations and Iran's border compulsions intersect.

India's diplomatic dilemma after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 is one of the most delicate questions in contemporary Indian foreign policy. New Delhi had invested heavily in the Afghan Republic after 2001 and had cultivated strong relations with Afghan democratic institutions, civil society, students, professionals, parliamentarians, provincial communities and development agencies. The sudden collapse of that order and the return of the Taliban created a difficult strategic paradox: India could neither endorse the Taliban's seizure of power nor ignore the political authority controlling Afghan territory. This produced a situation of *engagement without endorsement*.

India's first dilemma concerns recognition. Formal recognition of the Taliban regime would have raised ethical, diplomatic and strategic questions because of concerns regarding inclusive governance, women's rights, minority protection, terrorism and the Taliban's historical links with Pakistan-backed networks. At the same time, total non-engagement would have allowed Pakistan, China and other actors to monopolize influence in Kabul. Therefore, India had to search for a middle path: maintain channels, provide humanitarian aid, protect Indian interests, avoid premature recognition, and preserve long-term goodwill among the Afghan people. This was *calibrated pragmatism*.

The second dilemma concerns security. India's foremost concern is that Afghanistan should not again become a sanctuary for anti-India terrorist groups. The Taliban's past association with extremist networks and Pakistan's historical influence over sections of the Taliban created serious anxiety in New Delhi. India had to assess whether engagement with Taliban authorities could help secure commitments against terrorism or whether such engagement might legitimize a regime whose ideological background remains problematic. This tension continues to define India's Afghan diplomacy.

The third dilemma concerns Pakistan. For decades, Pakistan has sought influence in Afghanistan as part of its strategic-depth thinking. India's presence in Afghanistan has been viewed by Pakistan with suspicion. After the Taliban's return, New Delhi feared that Islamabad might regain excessive influence in Kabul. Yet subsequent tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban also demonstrated that Afghan politics cannot be reduced entirely to Pakistani control. India's dilemma has been to re-enter the Afghan diplomatic space without becoming trapped in Pakistan-centric reactions. This requires *strategic patience* and a nuanced understanding of Afghan nationalism.

The fourth dilemma concerns humanitarian responsibility. India has deep goodwill among Afghans because of development assistance, scholarships, medical support, infrastructure projects and cultural ties. If India disengaged completely, ordinary Afghans would suffer and India's moral standing would weaken. Yet delivering humanitarian assistance under Taliban rule involves coordination with authorities that India has not fully recognized. Therefore, India has had to separate support for the Afghan people from political endorsement of the Taliban. This distinction is central to India's post-2021 approach.

The fifth dilemma concerns women and minority rights. India's democratic identity and civilizational pluralism make it difficult to ignore restrictions on Afghan women, girls and minorities. At the same time, diplomacy often requires engagement with regimes whose internal practices are troubling. India's challenge is to express concern without losing all practical influence. A policy based only on moral denunciation may satisfy public sentiment but reduce India's capacity to affect outcomes. A policy based only on pragmatism may undermine values. Hence, India's dilemma is a balance between *normative responsibility* and *strategic realism*.

The sixth dilemma concerns Chabahar and connectivity. India's access to Afghanistan through Iran remains strategically important. If India refuses all engagement with Kabul, the Chabahar route's Afghan dimension becomes weaker. If India engages too deeply, it may appear to normalize Taliban rule. Therefore, India must preserve connectivity for humanitarian, commercial and strategic reasons while maintaining diplomatic caution. Chabahar becomes an instrument that allows India to maintain people-centred engagement even amid political ambiguity.

The seventh dilemma concerns great-power and regional competition. China has shown interest in Afghanistan's minerals and Belt and Road connectivity. Russia, Iran, Central Asian states and Pakistan have maintained varying degrees of contact with Taliban authorities. If India remains absent, it risks strategic marginalization. If it moves too fast, it risks political criticism and security exposure. India's Afghan diplomacy is therefore a slow exercise in *competitive engagement under constraint*.

India's gradual reopening of diplomatic channels, humanitarian support and upgrading of its presence in Kabul reflect this careful balancing. The move does not necessarily mean ideological acceptance of Taliban rule; rather, it reflects recognition that diplomacy requires presence. A country that has no presence has limited influence. India's return to Kabul is best understood as a pragmatic attempt to protect its long-term interests, support Afghans and prevent diplomatic exclusion.

In conclusion, India's diplomatic dilemma after the Taliban's return is a sophisticated test of Indian statecraft. India must oppose terrorism, preserve democratic values, protect its development legacy, support Afghan people, avoid strategic exclusion, manage Pakistan's role, and coordinate with Iran and other regional actors. In the refined language of diplomacy, India's Afghanistan policy is a strategy of *principled pragmatism amid geopolitical ambiguity*.

10.4 Future of India–Iran Cooperation in Afghanistan

The future of India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan will depend upon the ability of both countries to combine humanitarian responsibility, counter-terrorism vigilance, connectivity preservation and regional-stability diplomacy. Afghanistan remains unstable, economically fragile and politically isolated. Its humanitarian crisis continues; its security environment

remains uncertain; its relations with neighbours are complicated; and its internal governance raises serious international concerns. Under such conditions, India and Iran cannot afford indifference. Afghanistan will remain a shared strategic theatre.

The future cooperation between India and Iran will not necessarily take the form of a formal alliance. It is more likely to emerge through consultations, Chabahar-related coordination, humanitarian supply routes, trade facilitation, counter-narcotics awareness, regional dialogues and pragmatic engagement with Afghan authorities when necessary. India and Iran have different relationships with Afghanistan, but they share enough interests to cooperate. These shared interests include preventing terrorism, avoiding refugee crises, preserving connectivity, supporting Afghan livelihoods and reducing Pakistan's ability to monopolize Afghan transit.

Iran's role will remain indispensable because of geography. Iran shares a border with Afghanistan and hosts large Afghan populations. India's role will remain important because of development credibility, humanitarian resources, market access and diplomatic goodwill among Afghans. Together, India and Iran can contribute to Afghanistan's stabilization by supporting routes, aid, trade and regional consultation. This is *cooperative regional realism*.

Chabahar will remain the most practical platform for future cooperation. It can carry humanitarian goods, support Afghan trade, connect India with western Afghanistan, and provide an alternative to Pakistan-controlled routes. If Afghanistan's internal conditions improve, the Chabahar route could also support wider regional commerce linking India, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Thus, the future of India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan is closely tied to the future of Chabahar.

10.4.1 Humanitarian Cooperation

Humanitarian cooperation will remain the most acceptable and necessary field of India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's population has faced food insecurity, unemployment, health crises, displacement, climate stress, restrictions on women's participation and reduced international assistance. Humanitarian engagement is therefore not optional; it is a moral and regional necessity. India and Iran can cooperate by facilitating the

movement of wheat, medicines, vaccines, medical equipment, educational material and relief supplies through routes such as Chabahar.

India's humanitarian credibility in Afghanistan is strong because of its long record of assistance. India has supplied food grains, medicines, vaccines, scholarships, medical treatment and development projects. Iran, by contrast, has borne the direct burden of hosting Afghan refugees and maintaining border-level humanitarian engagement. These two roles are complementary. India can provide assistance; Iran can provide access and transit; Afghanistan receives relief. This creates a triangular humanitarian pattern.

Humanitarian cooperation through Chabahar has special significance because it bypasses politically sensitive Pakistan routes. If Pakistan restricts access or border closures disrupt movement, Chabahar can provide an alternative. A humanitarian route that does not depend on adversarial transit is strategically valuable. It ensures that food and medicines are not held hostage to political rivalry. This is the essence of *humanitarian corridor diplomacy*.

Humanitarian cooperation can also involve the World Food Programme, UN agencies, the Red Crescent, Indian institutions, Iranian logistics networks and Afghan local distribution mechanisms. Multilateral coordination can reduce political suspicion and ensure that aid reaches the intended population. India and Iran can support such coordination without requiring full political normalization with the Taliban. This allows them to help the Afghan people while maintaining diplomatic caution.

Medical cooperation is another important field. Afghanistan's healthcare system remains fragile. India can provide medicines, telemedicine, training, hospital support and medical scholarships. Iran, with border proximity and Afghan refugee communities, can support health access and transit. Joint or parallel health support would enhance regional goodwill and reduce human suffering. In diplomacy, medical assistance often produces durable trust because it touches everyday life.

Education and capacity-building assistance may also continue in adjusted forms. Afghan students, professionals, women, civil servants, doctors and engineers have benefited from Indian training and scholarships. Iran also hosts Afghan communities and educational links. Even if formal institutional cooperation is difficult under Taliban rule, distance learning, scholarships outside Afghanistan, vocational programmes and digital education may

continue. Humanitarian cooperation should therefore include knowledge, not only food.

Humanitarian cooperation also reduces the risk of radicalization. Poverty, hunger and despair can create conditions in which extremist groups recruit vulnerable people. By supporting livelihoods, food security and education, India and Iran indirectly contribute to security. Humanitarian assistance is therefore not separate from counter-terrorism; it is a preventive dimension of stability.

However, humanitarian cooperation must be carefully monitored. Aid can be diverted, politicized or used for regime legitimacy. India and Iran must work with credible agencies and transparent mechanisms. The objective should be assistance to the Afghan people, not political endorsement of any authority. This distinction is essential for sustaining international credibility.

In conclusion, humanitarian cooperation is the most immediate and constructive future field for India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan. It allows both countries to serve the Afghan people, preserve regional access, reduce suffering and maintain diplomatic relevance. In the refined language of ethical geopolitics, humanitarian cooperation is the *compassionate bridge through which strategic rivals of instability become partners in relief*.

10.4.2 Counter-Terrorism Concerns

Counter-terrorism concerns will remain a central pillar of India–Iran cooperation regarding Afghanistan. Afghanistan's geography, history of conflict and weak institutions have made it vulnerable to extremist groups, transnational jihadist networks, narcotics-linked criminal organizations and ideological radicalization. The Taliban's return reduced one form of conflict but did not eliminate the terrorism problem. Groups such as Islamic State–Khorasan Province, Al-Qaeda-linked elements, anti-Pakistan militants, sectarian groups and regionally connected extremist networks continue to generate concern.

India's counter-terrorism concern is shaped by the fear that Afghanistan-based or Afghanistan-linked networks could support anti-India militancy. The memory of the 1990s, the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814, Pakistan-backed militant ecosystems and attacks on Indian missions in Afghanistan continues to influence Indian thinking. India cannot allow Afghanistan to

again become an operational or ideological sanctuary for anti-India terrorism. Therefore, dialogue with Iran on Afghan security remains important.

Iran's counter-terrorism concerns are shaped by border proximity and sectarian threats. Iran worries about extremist Sunni groups, ISKP attacks against Shia communities, narcotics-financed armed networks and instability in western Afghanistan. Tehran also remains attentive to the security of Hazaras and other Shia groups. Iran's direct border exposure gives its counter-terrorism concerns an immediacy that India does not share geographically but understands strategically.

India and Iran can cooperate through intelligence consultation, diplomatic coordination, regional forums and assessment of extremist threats. Formal counter-terrorism cooperation may be limited by political sensitivities, but structured dialogue can still be valuable. Both countries need to understand developments inside Afghanistan, including the strength of ISKP, the Taliban's internal factions, Pakistan's role, narcotics networks and regional militant movements. Knowledge-sharing is a form of strategic cooperation.

Counter-terrorism must also include counter-narcotics. Afghanistan's drug economy has historically financed violence and criminal networks. Iran has suffered deeply from narcotics trafficking because of its location on major routes. India is also vulnerable to drug trafficking and associated criminal financing. Therefore, India–Iran cooperation should include attention to narcotics, synthetic drugs, border crime and financial networks. Security threats today are hybrid; terrorism and organized crime often overlap.

The Taliban's own role creates complexity. The Taliban claims to oppose ISKP and has taken action against some groups, but its historical ties with other extremist networks remain a concern. India and Iran must therefore avoid simplistic assumptions. Engagement with Taliban authorities may be necessary for practical security reasons, but trust must be limited and conditional. This is *verification-based diplomacy*.

Counter-terrorism cooperation also requires attention to radicalization. Extremist narratives can spread through digital platforms, refugee communities, prisons, religious networks and conflict zones. India and Iran both have an interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming an ideological export centre for radical movements. This requires education, economic

stability, community engagement and monitoring of extremist propaganda. Security is not only military; it is social and informational.

Regional forums can support counter-terrorism dialogue. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Moscow Format, regional security dialogues, UN processes and India–Central Asia mechanisms can all provide platforms for discussing Afghanistan. India and Iran may not agree on every issue, but they can coordinate around shared concerns. Afghanistan’s terrorism problem cannot be managed by one country alone.

In conclusion, counter-terrorism concerns will continue to bind India and Iran in Afghanistan-related geopolitics. India fears anti-India terrorism and Pakistan-linked networks; Iran fears border insecurity, ISKP, sectarian violence and narcotics-linked militancy. Their cooperation must be cautious, practical and intelligence-informed. In the language of security strategy, Afghanistan is the *volatile theatre where India’s counter-terrorism anxieties and Iran’s border-security imperatives intersect*.

10.4.3 Regional Stability

Regional stability is the broadest and most important objective of future India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan. A stable Afghanistan can connect South Asia, Central Asia, Iran and the wider Eurasian space. An unstable Afghanistan can export terrorism, refugees, narcotics, extremism and economic distress. Therefore, Afghanistan’s stability is not only an Afghan national issue; it is a regional public good. India and Iran both have an interest in preserving that public good.

Regional stability requires inclusive governance inside Afghanistan. A state that excludes major ethnic, religious, gender and political groups becomes internally fragile. India and Iran may express this concern differently, but both understand that a narrow and coercive political order can produce instability. Afghanistan’s society is plural, containing Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baloch and other communities. Durable stability requires accommodation, not domination. Therefore, India–Iran cooperation should support the principle of an inclusive Afghan political arrangement.

Regional stability also requires economic viability. Afghanistan cannot remain stable if its people face hunger, unemployment, isolation and collapse of public services. Trade routes, humanitarian aid, electricity, health, education, agriculture and small business are essential. Chabahar can

contribute by providing access to markets and supplies. India and Iran can support economic stabilization through trade facilitation, aid movement and connectivity. Economic despair is a security risk.

Stability further requires preventing Afghanistan from becoming a theatre of proxy rivalry. Pakistan, Iran, India, China, Russia, Central Asian states and Western powers all have interests in Afghanistan. If these interests become purely competitive, Afghanistan may again become a battleground. India and Iran can help by supporting regional consultation and avoiding policies that intensify fragmentation. Their cooperation should be based on Afghanistan's sovereignty and regional balance.

Chabahar has a stabilizing role because it reduces transit monopoly. When Afghanistan depends excessively on one route or one neighbour, it becomes vulnerable to pressure. Diversified routes create economic resilience. Chabahar gives Afghanistan an alternative to Pakistan routes and connects it with India and Iran. This supports stability by increasing options. A state with more options is less vulnerable to coercion.

Iran's stability concerns include refugees, water and border management. India's stability concerns include terrorism, connectivity and Pakistan's influence. These concerns converge around the need for an Afghanistan that is not chaotic, extremist or economically suffocated. Therefore, regional stability is the common umbrella under which India and Iran can cooperate even when their tactical policies differ.

Central Asia is also connected to Afghanistan's stability. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan border Afghanistan and fear spillover of extremism and narcotics. India's Central Asia policy and Iran's Eurasian connectivity both require a stable Afghan environment. If Afghanistan becomes a bridge, India–Iran–Central Asia connectivity can grow. If it remains a battlefield, corridors will remain fragile. Thus, Afghanistan's stability determines the success of wider regional connectivity.

Water and climate issues must also be included in the stability agenda. Afghanistan's water projects, droughts, climate change, migration and rural distress can create tension with neighbours, including Iran and Central Asian states. Stability is no longer only about guns and borders; it is also about rivers, agriculture, livelihoods and environment. India and Iran can support

technical dialogue, humanitarian relief and development approaches that reduce ecological tension.

Regional stability also requires careful engagement with the Taliban. Total isolation may worsen humanitarian collapse and push Afghanistan deeper into dependence on limited actors. Unconditional acceptance may encourage repression and insecurity. The middle path is conditional engagement based on counter-terrorism commitments, humanitarian access, inclusive governance and protection of basic rights. India and Iran may differ in method, but both can support a pragmatic regional approach.

In conclusion, regional stability is the ultimate objective of India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan. Humanitarian aid, counter-terrorism, Chabahar, trade access, refugee management, water dialogue and diplomatic consultation are all parts of the same larger aim. Afghanistan must be transformed from a source of instability into a corridor of cooperation. In the elevated language of regional geopolitics, India and Iran must work so that Afghanistan becomes not a *graveyard of ambitions*, but a *bridge of balanced Asian connectivity*.

Concluding Observation

The future of India–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan will be shaped by a careful balance between pragmatism and principle. India faces the dilemma of engaging Taliban-ruled Afghanistan without legitimizing extremism or abandoning democratic concerns. Iran faces the immediate pressures of refugees, borders, water, narcotics and security. Both countries, however, share an interest in humanitarian relief, counter-terrorism, Chabahar-based access and regional stability.

Afghanistan remains a difficult but unavoidable theatre. India cannot protect its continental interests by ignoring Kabul, and Iran cannot protect its eastern frontier by isolating itself from Afghan realities. Their cooperation will therefore be cautious, layered and practical. It will involve humanitarian corridors, security consultations, trade access, regional forums and sustained diplomatic engagement. In the broader architecture of India–Iran relations, Afghanistan will remain the *strategic testing ground of their capacity to convert shared anxieties into constructive regional cooperation*.

Chapter 11:

Pakistan Factor in India–Iran Relations

Pakistan occupies a complex, sensitive and structurally significant place in India–Iran relations. It is not merely India’s western neighbour or Iran’s eastern neighbour; it is a *geopolitical intervening space* between India and the regions to which India seeks access: Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran, the Caspian region and Eurasia. The Pakistan factor has therefore shaped India–Iran relations in multiple ways: as a historical variable during the Cold War, as a strategic obstacle in India’s westward connectivity, as a security concern in Afghanistan, as a neighbour of Iran with border vulnerabilities, and as a partner of China through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. In the language of regional geopolitics, Pakistan is both a *geographical barrier* and a *strategic filter* in India’s relationship with Iran.

India–Iran relations cannot be fully understood without examining Pakistan because Pakistan’s location between India and Iran’s wider western and north-western approaches has influenced Indian strategic thinking since 1947. Before Partition, the Indian subcontinent had historical overland connections with Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia. After Partition, Pakistan controlled the land routes that connected India with these regions. This transformed India’s westward geography into a politically constrained geography. Consequently, Iran became increasingly important to India because it offered an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia through Chabahar and other connectivity frameworks.

Iran’s relations with Pakistan have also affected India’s calculations. During the Cold War, Iran under the Shah and Pakistan were both aligned with Western security arrangements, while India followed non-alignment and maintained close relations with the Soviet Union. This created a structural divergence between India and Iran in the early decades. However, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the end of the Cold War, Iran’s foreign policy changed, Pakistan’s regional role became more complicated, and India–Iran convergence grew, especially over Afghanistan, connectivity and strategic autonomy.

The Pakistan factor is therefore multidimensional. It includes Iran–Pakistan historical ties, Iran–Pakistan border security, Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan, China–Pakistan connectivity, Pakistan’s denial of land transit to India, and India’s strategic use of the Iran route. This chapter analyses these dimensions with special emphasis on how Pakistan’s geography and policies have strengthened India’s interest in Iran as an alternative corridor.

11.1 Iran–Pakistan Relations and India

Iran–Pakistan relations have passed through several phases: early warmth after Pakistan’s independence, Cold War alignment, post-revolutionary adjustment, sectarian and Afghan tensions, border-security difficulties, energy and trade cooperation, and more recent pragmatic engagement. For India, these relations are important because Iran and Pakistan share a border, Pakistan is India’s principal regional rival, and Iran’s attitude toward Pakistan affects the strategic space available to India in West Asia, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Iran was among the earliest states to recognize Pakistan after its creation in 1947. The two countries developed close diplomatic relations during the early period. Under the Shah, Iran viewed Pakistan as a friendly Muslim neighbour and as part of the Western-aligned security architecture. Pakistan, in turn, valued Iran as a strategically located neighbour connecting South Asia with West Asia. This early warmth created a foundation of state-to-state familiarity between Tehran and Islamabad.

For India, this early Iran–Pakistan closeness created diplomatic complications. India’s non-aligned posture and its disputes with Pakistan meant that Iran’s closeness to Pakistan indirectly limited India–Iran strategic intimacy during the Cold War. Iran’s participation with Pakistan in Western-backed arrangements such as the Baghdad Pact and CENTO reinforced the perception that Tehran and Islamabad stood within a different strategic camp from India. This did not prevent India and Iran from maintaining relations, but it reduced the scope for deep strategic cooperation.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 changed Iran’s international orientation. Iran moved away from pro-Western alignment and adopted an anti-Western revolutionary posture. Pakistan, however, remained closely linked with the United States, Saudi Arabia and later the Afghan jihad against Soviet forces. The Iran–Pakistan relationship therefore became more complicated.

Religious identity alone could not remove strategic differences. Iran's Shia revolutionary ideology and Pakistan's Sunni-majority strategic orientation created new tensions, especially during the Afghan conflicts and sectarian violence of the 1980s and 1990s.

Afghanistan became a major point of divergence between Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan supported the Taliban's rise in the 1990s, while Iran viewed the Taliban with suspicion and hostility, especially after violence against Shia groups and the killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998. India also opposed Taliban domination because of Pakistan-backed extremist networks and anti-India security implications. This created a significant India–Iran convergence. The Pakistan factor thus indirectly brought India and Iran closer in Afghanistan.

In the contemporary period, Iran–Pakistan relations are marked by *pragmatic engagement under strategic suspicion*. The two countries cooperate in trade, border management, energy discussions and regional forums, but they also face tensions involving Baloch militancy, narcotics, smuggling, illegal migration and cross-border attacks. Iran cannot ignore Pakistan because of geography; Pakistan cannot ignore Iran because of energy, border security and West Asian diplomacy. Yet neither side has complete trust.

India watches Iran–Pakistan relations carefully. New Delhi does not expect Iran to become anti-Pakistan, nor would such expectation be realistic. Iran must maintain working relations with Pakistan because they share a border and regional interests. However, India seeks to ensure that Iran does not become strategically aligned with Pakistan in ways harmful to Indian interests. India's policy is therefore based on maintaining a strong independent relationship with Iran while recognizing Iran's need for balanced regional diplomacy.

Iran's relations with Pakistan also affect Chabahar. Chabahar is located in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province, not far from Pakistan's Gwadar region. While Chabahar is a cooperative India–Iran project, Gwadar is linked with China–Pakistan connectivity. This creates a subtle regional comparison. India presents Chabahar as a constructive connectivity project for Afghanistan and Central Asia, while Pakistan views connectivity through Gwadar and CPEC as central to its strategic-economic future. The proximity of these two ports gives the Iran–Pakistan–India triangle a maritime dimension.

In conclusion, Iran–Pakistan relations influence India–Iran relations through history, security, Afghanistan, border politics and connectivity competition. Iran and Pakistan have old ties, but they also have deep difficulties. India must understand this relationship with realism. In the refined language of diplomacy, Pakistan is the *third angle of the India–Iran strategic triangle*, shaping both constraints and opportunities.

11.1.1 Historical Iran–Pakistan Ties

Historical Iran–Pakistan ties began with remarkable warmth. Iran was one of the first countries to recognize Pakistan after its creation, and the two countries soon established diplomatic relations. The early relationship was shaped by cultural familiarity, Islamic solidarity, Persianate civilizational memory, regional proximity and shared membership in Western-backed security structures. Pakistan’s founding elite also recognized Iran’s importance as a neighbouring Muslim state with deep historical links to the subcontinent.

The cultural foundations of Iran–Pakistan ties are older than the modern states themselves. Persian language, literature, poetry, administrative culture and courtly refinement had deeply influenced the Indian subcontinent for centuries. Pakistan inherited a major part of this Indo-Persian legacy. Urdu itself developed within a Persianate cultural environment, and Persian poetry, Sufi traditions, Islamic scholarship and cultural vocabulary shaped elite and popular life across South Asia. Therefore, Iran and Pakistan could claim a cultural relationship rooted in history.

During the early Cold War, Iran under the Shah and Pakistan moved into Western-aligned security structures. Both were associated with the Baghdad Pact, later CENTO, and both were broadly aligned with the United States-led order. This alignment created a strategic closeness between Tehran and Islamabad. Pakistan saw Iran as a friendly western neighbour and a source of diplomatic support. Iran saw Pakistan as a Muslim partner and a useful regional ally against Soviet influence.

Iran supported Pakistan diplomatically and materially during some of Pakistan’s conflicts with India, especially during the 1965 and 1971 wars. This affected Indian perceptions. New Delhi viewed Iran’s closeness to Pakistan as one reason for caution in India–Iran relations during the Cold

War. Although India maintained formal relations with Iran, the Pakistan factor prevented the emergence of deeper strategic trust in the early decades.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 altered the ideological basis of Iran–Pakistan relations. The Shah’s pro-Western monarchy was replaced by an Islamic Republic with revolutionary ambitions and anti-American orientation. Pakistan recognized the Islamic Republic, but the regional environment had changed. Sectarian politics, Saudi influence in Pakistan, the Afghan jihad, and Iran’s revolutionary identity created new complexities. The relationship survived, but it became less straightforward.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 further complicated Iran–Pakistan relations. Pakistan became a frontline state in the U.S.-Saudi-backed Afghan jihad, while Iran, though opposed to Soviet occupation, had different ideological and strategic priorities. Iran supported Shia and Persian-speaking Afghan groups, while Pakistan supported Sunni Islamist and Pashtun-dominated groups. These differences later became sharper during the Afghan civil war and Taliban rise.

The Taliban period of the 1990s was particularly important. Pakistan was a major supporter of the Taliban, while Iran saw the Taliban as hostile, sectarian and dangerous. India also opposed Taliban rule. This produced a rare India–Iran overlap against Pakistan-backed Afghan politics. Thus, historical Iran–Pakistan ties did not prevent Iran from disagreeing deeply with Pakistan on Afghanistan.

In the twenty-first century, Iran–Pakistan relations have been pragmatic. The two countries discuss trade, border management, electricity, energy pipelines, security cooperation and regional issues. Yet tensions remain because of Baloch militancy, illegal trade, narcotics and competing external alignments. Pakistan has close ties with Saudi Arabia, China and the United States; Iran has its own ties with India, Russia, China and regional actors. Their relationship is therefore not a simple alliance but a *managed neighbourhood*.

For India, the historical ties between Iran and Pakistan are important but not determinative. India understands that Iran cannot abandon relations with Pakistan, just as India cannot ignore its own relations with Iran despite ties with the Gulf and the United States. The task for India is not to break Iran–Pakistan ties, but to build a sufficiently strong India–Iran relationship based on independent mutual interests. This is mature diplomacy.

In conclusion, historical Iran–Pakistan ties began with cultural warmth and Cold War alignment, but later passed through ideological, Afghan, sectarian and border-security complications. Their history shows both closeness and mistrust. For India, this history explains why Iran was once closer to Pakistan, but also why modern Iran has enough independent interests to cooperate deeply with India. In the language of regional history, Iran–Pakistan ties are a *legacy relationship transformed by revolutionary change and geopolitical friction*.

11.1.2 Border Security Issues

Border security is one of the most serious challenges in Iran–Pakistan relations. Iran and Pakistan share a long border running through sensitive and underdeveloped regions, especially Iran’s Sistan and Baluchestan province and Pakistan’s Balochistan province. This borderland is marked by difficult terrain, ethnic Baloch linkages across borders, smuggling networks, narcotics routes, militant groups, weak economic development and periodic violence. It is a classic example of a *peripheral frontier with central strategic consequences*.

The border region is not merely a line on a map; it is a social and political space inhabited by communities with cross-border ethnic, tribal and economic ties. The Baloch population lives across Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. While many Baloch communities are peaceful and ordinary citizens, the region has also witnessed insurgent and militant activity. Both Iran and Pakistan accuse militant groups of using the other side’s territory for shelter or movement. This creates recurring distrust.

Iran is particularly concerned about Sunni militant groups operating near its south-eastern frontier. Groups such as Jaish al-Adl have carried out attacks against Iranian security forces and officials. Tehran has repeatedly complained that such groups find sanctuary or operational space across the border. Pakistan, on the other hand, worries about Baloch separatist militants and anti-Pakistan groups that may move through Iranian territory or exploit the borderland. Thus, both states see the border as a zone of insecurity.

The January 2024 cross-border strikes between Iran and Pakistan revealed the seriousness of the problem. Iran attacked what it described as militant positions in Pakistan, and Pakistan retaliated by striking what it described as separatist militant targets inside Iran. This was a sharp escalation between

two neighbouring states that generally prefer to avoid direct confrontation. The incident showed that border militancy can rapidly become an interstate crisis.

For India, Iran–Pakistan border insecurity has indirect but important implications. Instability in Pakistan’s Balochistan region affects Gwadar, CPEC and Pakistan’s western security posture. Instability in Iran’s Sistan and Baluchestan affects Chabahar and Iran’s ability to serve as a stable transit corridor for India. Therefore, India has an interest in the stability of the Iran–Pakistan border, even though it is not directly involved in that border. Chabahar’s success requires a secure regional environment.

Border insecurity also affects regional connectivity. Ports, roads, pipelines and trade corridors cannot function well if the surrounding borderlands are unstable. Chabahar and Gwadar are both located in the broader Makran-Balochistan region. If militancy, smuggling or insurgency intensifies, investors and logistics companies become cautious. Therefore, border security is also a geoeconomic issue.

Narcotics trafficking is another major concern. Afghanistan’s drug economy has historically affected Iran and Pakistan. Smuggling routes pass through border regions, linking narcotics with organized crime, corruption and militancy. Iran has suffered heavily from drug trafficking and has invested significant resources in border control. Pakistan also faces trafficking and criminal networks. Drug flows weaken state authority and destabilize society. Hence, counter-narcotics is a shared security requirement.

Illegal fuel trade, human trafficking, weapons smuggling and informal cross-border commerce also complicate governance. Border communities often depend on informal trade because formal economic opportunities are limited. States must therefore balance enforcement with development. Excessive militarization without economic development may deepen alienation. The border requires *security with development*, not only coercion.

Iran and Pakistan have attempted to manage these issues through border commissions, security dialogues, fencing, intelligence cooperation and diplomatic engagement. Yet the problem persists because the region’s geography, poverty and militancy are difficult to control. Border security is not solved by one meeting or one operation; it requires long-term state capacity, economic integration and mutual trust.

India's strategic planners must recognize that Iran's border concerns influence its regional behaviour. Iran cannot treat Pakistan only through the lens of India; it must manage a shared frontier. Therefore, while India benefits from Iran's route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, it must also understand Tehran's need to avoid permanent hostility with Islamabad. This is why India's Iran policy must be sophisticated and non-maximalist.

In conclusion, Iran–Pakistan border security issues are rooted in geography, ethnic cross-border linkages, militancy, narcotics, smuggling and underdevelopment. They periodically strain Tehran–Islamabad relations and affect the wider India–Iran–Pakistan triangle. In strategic vocabulary, the Iran–Pakistan border is a *volatile frontier where local militancy can produce regional geopolitical consequences*.

11.1.3 Pakistan's Role in Regional Politics

Pakistan's role in regional politics is central to India–Iran relations because Pakistan sits at the intersection of South Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, the Arabian Sea, China's western strategy and Central Asian connectivity. Pakistan's geography gives it enormous potential as a regional connector, but its political choices, security doctrines, rivalry with India and internal instability have often converted that potential into regional tension. For India and Iran, Pakistan is therefore both a neighbouring reality and a strategic variable.

Pakistan's most important regional role has been in Afghanistan. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan became a frontline state in Afghan politics. During the 1980s, it supported Afghan mujahideen groups with U.S. and Saudi backing. During the 1990s, it became a major supporter of the Taliban. After 2001, Pakistan became an American partner in the war on terror but continued to be accused by Afghanistan, India and many Western analysts of maintaining links with Taliban networks. This duality made Pakistan's Afghan role highly controversial.

For India, Pakistan's Afghan policy has been viewed as a major security threat. New Delhi fears that Pakistan seeks strategic depth in Afghanistan and uses Afghan territory or Afghan-linked networks to support anti-India militancy. India's development role in Afghanistan has repeatedly been targeted by extremist attacks. Therefore, Pakistan's regional politics directly affect India's Afghan policy and indirectly strengthen India's need for Iran as an alternative access route.

For Iran, Pakistan's Afghan role has also been problematic. Iran opposed Taliban domination in the 1990s and supported groups resisting Taliban rule. Pakistan's support for Taliban forces created deep suspicion in Tehran. Although Iran and Pakistan have sometimes cooperated pragmatically, their Afghan preferences have not always aligned. Iran wants a stable Afghanistan that does not threaten its border, Shia communities or water interests. Pakistan has often sought influence through groups that Iran viewed with concern. This divergence created space for India–Iran convergence.

Pakistan's role in regional politics is also shaped by its close partnership with China. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor is the most visible expression of this partnership. CPEC seeks to connect China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Arabian Sea ports, especially Gwadar. Pakistan presents CPEC as a framework for regional connectivity and economic development. India, however, objects to CPEC because part of it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, a territory India claims as its own. Iran watches CPEC with a mixture of interest and caution because Gwadar lies close to Chabahar and because China's regional influence affects the balance of connectivity projects.

Gwadar and Chabahar are often compared because of their proximity and strategic meanings. Gwadar is linked with China–Pakistan connectivity; Chabahar is linked with India–Iran–Afghanistan connectivity. The two ports need not be enemies, and some Iranian and Pakistani voices have spoken of possible complementarity. Yet in practice, they symbolize different strategic alignments. Gwadar represents China–Pakistan access to the Arabian Sea; Chabahar represents India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia through Iran. This gives the Pakistan factor a maritime dimension.

Pakistan also plays a role in the politics of the Islamic world. Its ties with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, the Gulf states and Iran require constant balancing. Pakistan has historically depended on Gulf financial support and remittances, while also maintaining ties with Iran. During Iran–Saudi tensions, Pakistan often attempts balance, though its military and economic ties with Saudi Arabia have been significant. This balancing affects Iran's perception of Pakistan and India's assessment of regional alignments.

Pakistan's internal instability also affects regional politics. Militancy, economic crises, civil-military tensions, Baloch insurgency, sectarian violence and political polarization influence Pakistan's external behaviour. A

stable Pakistan could become a regional bridge; an unstable Pakistan becomes a source of uncertainty. For India and Iran, Pakistan's internal security challenges affect border stability, Afghanistan, narcotics, trade and connectivity.

Pakistan's role in regional politics is further complicated by its nuclear status. India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed rivals. Any major crisis between them raises global concern. Iran, as a neighbouring state with relations with both countries, must carefully manage its diplomacy during India–Pakistan tensions. Tehran often calls for restraint because regional war would damage wider stability, energy security and connectivity. This gives Iran an interest in avoiding escalation between India and Pakistan.

For India, the Pakistan factor justifies strategic diversification. India cannot depend on Pakistan-controlled routes for access to Afghanistan or Central Asia. It cannot allow Pakistan's geography to define the limits of Indian foreign policy. Therefore, Iran becomes essential. Chabahar, INSTC and Iran-based corridors allow India to reduce Pakistan's ability to obstruct Indian westward engagement. This is not merely economic policy; it is *geopolitical emancipation from transit dependence*.

In conclusion, Pakistan's role in regional politics affects India–Iran relations through Afghanistan, CPEC, Gwadar, China, Gulf alignments, border insecurity and India–Pakistan rivalry. Pakistan's geography gives it influence, but its rivalry with India and its Afghan policies have created obstacles to regional integration. In the language of grand strategy, Pakistan is the *intervening geopolitical variable that makes Iran indispensable to India's westward connectivity*.

11.2 India's Strategic Use of Iran Route

India's strategic use of the Iran route is one of the clearest examples of how geography can be reinterpreted through diplomacy and infrastructure. Pakistan blocks India's direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, but India can reach Iran by sea. From Iran, India can access Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian region and Russia through Chabahar, Iranian road and rail networks, and the International North–South Transport Corridor. Thus, Iran gives India a route around Pakistan's geographical obstruction.

The Iran route is strategic because it gives India *connectivity autonomy*. A country's foreign policy is weakened when its access to important regions depends on an adversarial neighbour. India's westward ambition cannot be built on Pakistan's permission. The Iran route reduces that vulnerability. It gives India an independent corridor to Afghanistan and Eurasia. In this sense, Iran is not only a partner; it is a *geographical solution*.

The route is also strategic because it links maritime India with continental Eurasia. India's western seaboard can send cargo to Chabahar or other Iranian ports. From there, goods can move toward Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian and Russia. This converts sea power into land access. In terms of classical geopolitics, India uses maritime capability to penetrate continental geography. This is where Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* and Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History* meet in practical policy.

India's use of the Iran route also supports Afghanistan's economic sovereignty. Afghanistan has historically depended heavily on Pakistani routes. When Pakistan closes borders or imposes restrictions, Afghan trade suffers. Iran's route, especially through Chabahar, gives Afghanistan another option. India's interest and Afghanistan's interest converge here: both benefit from reducing Pakistan's transit monopoly. Iran benefits as a corridor state. This creates a triangular alignment of Indian, Iranian and Afghan interests.

The Iran route also supports India's Central Asia policy. Central Asia is important for energy, uranium, minerals, security, trade and historical-cultural connections. Yet India's trade with Central Asia remains limited because of connectivity constraints. Iran offers the most realistic access route. Through Chabahar and INSTC-related routes, India can connect with Central Asian republics without depending on Pakistan. This gives India's Central Asia policy practical weight.

The route has broader strategic significance in relation to China–Pakistan connectivity. CPEC and Gwadar give China and Pakistan a major infrastructure presence in the Arabian Sea and western South Asia. India's use of the Iran route, especially Chabahar, ensures that India is not absent from the regional connectivity map. Chabahar is not merely a reaction to Gwadar, but it does provide India with an alternative strategic foothold. It prevents connectivity exclusion.

The Iran route also helps India diversify supply chains. Global disruptions have shown that reliance on a small number of routes is risky. The Suez Canal blockage, Red Sea instability, wars, sanctions and maritime insecurity have strengthened the need for alternative corridors. Iran-based routes, especially when linked with the INSTC, provide India with additional options. Strategic resilience depends on such route plurality.

However, the Iran route is not free from challenges. U.S. sanctions on Iran complicate banking, investment, insurance and shipping. Infrastructure delays affect Chabahar's full potential. Afghanistan's instability affects transit. Iran–Pakistan border insecurity can disturb the wider region. India must therefore pursue the Iran route with *strategic patience* and *diplomatic finesse*. It is a necessary route, but not an easy route.

India's use of the Iran route is also an example of multi-alignment. India maintains relations with the United States, Gulf states, Israel, Russia and Iran simultaneously. Chabahar sometimes creates tension with U.S. sanctions policy, but India argues that the project supports Afghanistan and regional connectivity. This demonstrates India's attempt to protect national interest through balanced diplomacy. Strategic autonomy requires the capacity to work with multiple partners despite contradictions.

In conclusion, India's strategic use of the Iran route is driven by the need to bypass Pakistan, access Afghanistan, reach Central Asia, integrate with Eurasia, balance China–Pakistan connectivity and strengthen supply-chain resilience. In elevated geopolitical language, the Iran route is the *westward corridor through which India converts maritime reach into continental strategy*.

11.2.1 Bypassing Pakistan

Bypassing Pakistan is one of the principal strategic motivations behind India's use of the Iran route. Pakistan's refusal to provide India normal overland transit to Afghanistan and Central Asia has long constrained Indian foreign policy. This denial has transformed India's natural geographical proximity to Afghanistan and Central Asia into an artificial strategic distance. Chabahar and Iranian routes seek to overcome this condition. They allow India to reach the west and north-west without passing through Pakistan.

The phrase *bypassing Pakistan* should be understood carefully. It does not necessarily mean hostility or aggression; it means the creation of alternative

access where direct access is denied. In diplomatic language, this is better described as *route diversification* or *alternative connectivity*. India does not need to depend on Pakistan's consent if it can use maritime access to Iran and overland movement from Iran to Afghanistan and Central Asia. This is a legitimate exercise of sovereign connectivity.

Pakistan's transit denial has affected India's trade with Afghanistan. Indian goods have demand in Afghanistan, and Afghan goods have demand in India. Yet the absence of direct land transit increases cost, delays movement and reduces commercial potential. Air corridors are useful but limited. Chabahar provides a more substantial route. It allows larger cargo movement and strengthens trade possibilities. Thus, bypassing Pakistan is not only strategic; it is also commercial.

Bypassing Pakistan also has humanitarian significance. India has sent food and medical assistance to Afghanistan. When Pakistan routes are unavailable or politically constrained, humanitarian supplies require alternative pathways. Chabahar can function as a humanitarian corridor. In this sense, bypassing Pakistan can serve the Afghan people by ensuring that assistance is not blocked by regional rivalry.

The strategic importance of bypassing Pakistan is even clearer in relation to Central Asia. India has historical and strategic interests in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but Pakistan blocks the shortest land routes. Iran provides India with a different geography. Through Chabahar, Iranian roads and railways, and INSTC-linked routes, India can reach Central Asia from the south. This weakens Pakistan's ability to limit India's Eurasian presence.

Bypassing Pakistan also reduces Pakistan's leverage over Afghanistan. Afghanistan has long suffered from dependence on Pakistani ports and border crossings. When Afghan traders have access to Chabahar, Pakistan's transit monopoly declines. This supports Afghanistan's economic sovereignty. India benefits because a more autonomous Afghanistan is less vulnerable to Pakistan's strategic pressure. Iran benefits because it becomes a transit partner. Thus, bypassing Pakistan creates a wider regional realignment.

The route also has psychological importance. For decades, Pakistan's geography created a sense that India's westward land access was permanently blocked. Chabahar challenges this psychological barrier. It shows that

geography can be reworked through maritime routes, ports and diplomacy. This is why Chabahar has symbolic power beyond its cargo volume. It represents India's refusal to accept geographical confinement.

China–Pakistan connectivity gives this issue additional urgency. Gwadar and CPEC strengthen Pakistan's role in regional logistics and give China access to the Arabian Sea. If India lacked an alternative route, it would be disadvantaged in the emerging connectivity politics of the region. Chabahar ensures that India has its own corridor. It is India's instrument of *connectivity balance*.

However, bypassing Pakistan through Iran faces constraints. Sanctions on Iran slow investment and private-sector participation. The Chabahar–Zahedan railway and other infrastructure links require sustained development. Afghanistan's instability creates uncertainty. Commercial viability must be strengthened through cargo volume, efficient customs, competitive tariffs and reliable shipping. Bypassing Pakistan is strategically necessary, but its success depends on operational excellence.

India must also avoid presenting the Iran route only as an anti-Pakistan project. Its diplomatic strength lies in its positive purpose: helping Afghanistan, connecting Central Asia, strengthening Iran's development, diversifying regional trade and supporting Eurasian connectivity. If Chabahar is framed only as a rival to Pakistan, its constructive legitimacy is reduced. If it is framed as a regional public good, its diplomatic value increases.

In conclusion, bypassing Pakistan is a central reason for India's strategic use of the Iran route. Pakistan's transit denial created the problem; Iran's geography provides the solution. Chabahar and related corridors allow India to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia independently. In the refined language of strategy, bypassing Pakistan through Iran is India's *geopolitical liberation from imposed continental obstruction*.

Concluding Observation

The Pakistan factor has been a persistent and powerful influence on India–Iran relations. Iran and Pakistan share historical ties, cultural contacts and a long border, but their relationship is complicated by Afghanistan, sectarian tensions, Baloch militancy, border insecurity and competing alignments. Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, its partnership with China, its control over

India's direct westward land routes and its strategic rivalry with India have all increased the importance of Iran in Indian foreign policy.

India's strategic use of the Iran route is therefore not accidental. It is a carefully constructed response to Pakistan's geographical obstruction. Through Chabahar, Iranian transport networks and wider Eurasian corridors, India seeks access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia without depending on Pakistan. Iran becomes the indispensable corridor state in this strategy. In the broader architecture of India–Iran relations, Pakistan is the *obstructing geography* that makes Iran the *enabling geography*.

11.2.2 Reducing Dependence on Pakistan-Controlled Routes

Reducing dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes is one of the most decisive objectives of India's Iran-centred connectivity strategy. Since 1947, Pakistan's location between India and Afghanistan has enabled Islamabad to act as a *geographical gatekeeper* between India and the north-western continental world. Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran, the Caspian region and Eurasia are historically connected with India through civilizational, commercial and strategic memories, but Pakistan's denial of normal land transit has transformed this historical proximity into a contemporary strategic obstruction. India's use of Iran, particularly through Chabahar, is therefore a deliberate attempt to overcome the *cartographic imprisonment* created by Partition and Pakistan's hostile transit policy.

Pakistan-controlled routes have traditionally shaped Afghanistan's external trade. Karachi and other Pakistani routes have offered Afghanistan one of the nearest outlets to the sea. However, Afghanistan's dependence on these routes has repeatedly exposed it to border closures, political pressure, delays, customs disputes and strategic vulnerability. Whenever relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan deteriorate, trade suffers. India's interest in reducing dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes is therefore not merely an Indian concern; it also supports Afghanistan's search for *economic sovereignty* and *transit pluralism*.

For India, dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes is strategically unacceptable because India–Pakistan relations are marked by wars, terrorism, border crises, mistrust and unresolved territorial disputes. A major power cannot build its long-term Afghan or Central Asian policy on the goodwill of an adversarial state. If India's access to Afghanistan depended entirely on

Pakistan, Islamabad would possess a permanent *transit veto* over Indian diplomacy. Chabahar and the Iran route weaken this veto by creating an alternative pathway.

The reduction of dependence also has commercial significance. Indian goods such as pharmaceuticals, tea, rice, textiles, machinery, medical equipment, educational materials and construction supplies have natural demand in Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, lack of reliable land access increases cost and reduces competitiveness. Air corridors can provide temporary support, but they cannot substitute for a durable sea-land corridor. Iran gives India a more sustainable route through maritime shipment to Chabahar and onward movement toward Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Reducing dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes also strengthens India's humanitarian diplomacy. Afghanistan has repeatedly faced food insecurity, drought, war, displacement and institutional collapse. Humanitarian supplies such as wheat, medicines and medical equipment require reliable delivery routes. If humanitarian access is controlled by Pakistan's political decisions, assistance can become vulnerable to regional rivalry. Chabahar provides India a route where humanitarian delivery does not depend on Pakistan's consent. In this sense, alternative connectivity becomes *ethical geopolitics*.

The Iran route also improves India's bargaining position in the region. A country with only one route has limited diplomatic flexibility; a country with multiple routes has strategic resilience. By investing in Chabahar and participating in the International North–South Transport Corridor, India creates a network of alternatives. These alternatives may not always be easier or cheaper in the short term, but they preserve long-term autonomy. In grand strategy, *optionality* is itself a form of power.

Pakistan's route control also affects India's Central Asia policy. Central Asian states are rich in energy, uranium, minerals, agricultural products and strategic location, but India's trade with them has remained below potential because of poor connectivity. If India relied on Pakistan-controlled routes, its Central Asian policy would remain hostage to Pakistan's political calculations. Iran offers India an independent route through Chabahar, Bandar Abbas, Iranian railways, the Caspian region and INSTC-related corridors. This reduces Pakistan's ability to define the limits of India's Eurasian ambition.

The reduction of dependence also has psychological value. For decades, Pakistan's geography created the impression that India's westward land access was permanently blocked. Iran-centred connectivity challenges this assumption. It shows that geography is not destiny when diplomacy, ports, roads and maritime strategy are intelligently combined. India uses the Arabian Sea to reach Iran and then uses Iranian geography to enter Afghanistan and Central Asia. This is a refined example of *strategic geographical re-imagination*.

However, India's attempt to reduce dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes must not be framed merely as anti-Pakistan policy. Its diplomatic strength lies in its constructive purpose: supporting Afghanistan's autonomy, strengthening Iran's developmental role, connecting Central Asia, expanding trade and diversifying Eurasian supply chains. If the Iran route is presented only as a political counter to Pakistan, its positive regional legitimacy is weakened. If it is presented as a *regional public good*, its acceptance increases.

In conclusion, reducing dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes is central to India's Iran policy because it liberates India's westward strategy from Pakistan's geographical obstruction. It supports Afghanistan's trade autonomy, strengthens India's humanitarian access, gives India a corridor to Central Asia and enhances India's strategic autonomy. In the elevated language of geopolitics, Iran provides India the *alternative civilizational corridor* through which the subcontinent reconnects with the Eurasian interior.

11.2.3 Opening Access to Afghanistan and Central Asia

Opening access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is the broader purpose behind India's strategic use of the Iran route. Afghanistan and Central Asia are not peripheral spaces in India's foreign policy; they are part of India's extended neighbourhood, civilizational memory and continental strategy. Afghanistan is India's north-western strategic theatre, while Central Asia is the gateway to the Eurasian heartland. Pakistan's location and policies obstruct India's direct access to these regions. Iran, therefore, becomes the indispensable bridge.

Afghanistan has historical, cultural and strategic importance for India. It has been linked with India through Buddhism, trade, Persianate culture, Sufi

networks, migration, literature, food, music, architecture and political history. In modern times, Afghanistan has become important for counter-terrorism, development diplomacy, regional balance and access to Central Asia. India's development assistance in Afghanistan after 2001 reflected a desire to support an independent and stable Afghan state. Yet without access, development policy remains logistically constrained. Chabahar gives India the missing route.

The Iran route allows Indian goods to move by sea to Chabahar and from there through Iranian road and rail systems toward Afghanistan. The Zaranj–Delaram road inside Afghanistan further strengthens this logic because it connects the Iran–Afghanistan border with Afghanistan's internal road network. This combination of Chabahar, Iranian connectivity and Afghan road infrastructure forms a *strategic access chain*. It is through this chain that India's Afghan policy becomes physically operational.

Central Asia represents the second and larger horizon of India's access strategy. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are landlocked but strategically significant. Kazakhstan offers energy, uranium and industrial opportunities; Uzbekistan has demographic and political weight; Turkmenistan has gas reserves; Tajikistan has security significance and cultural proximity; Kyrgyzstan connects with wider Central Asian networks. India's engagement with these republics has expanded diplomatically, but trade remains limited because routes are weak. Iran offers the route that can transform aspiration into movement.

Chabahar can connect India with Central Asia through Afghanistan where conditions permit and through Iran's northern routes toward Turkmenistan, the Caspian region and beyond. The International North–South Transport Corridor further broadens this access by linking India, Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe. Therefore, Iran-based routes do not only open Afghanistan; they open the wider Eurasian landmass. Iran becomes India's *continental vestibule*.

Opening access to Afghanistan and Central Asia also serves India's energy and resource interests. Central Asia contains hydrocarbons, uranium, minerals and strategic commodities. India's energy security and industrial growth require diversified resource partnerships. Connectivity through Iran can support trade in fertilizers, minerals, metals, energy-related goods and

industrial inputs. Though pipelines and large energy projects remain difficult, improved routes strengthen India's capacity to engage the region.

This access also has security significance. India, Iran and Central Asian states share concerns regarding terrorism, extremism, narcotics trafficking and instability emanating from Afghanistan. Better connectivity can support diplomatic consultation, humanitarian assistance, capacity building and regional stabilization. Corridors are not only commercial lines; they are also instruments of security cooperation. A connected region has more tools for managing instability than an isolated region.

Opening access also allows India to participate in the competitive connectivity politics of Eurasia. China's Belt and Road Initiative has expanded Chinese influence across Central Asia and Pakistan. Russia retains historical and security influence. Turkey promotes trans-Caspian and Turkic linkages. Iran seeks corridor centrality. India cannot remain absent from this connectivity competition. Chabahar and Iran-based routes give India an entry point that is sovereign, independent and diplomatically acceptable.

The access to Afghanistan and Central Asia also revives older civilizational pathways. India's cultural links with Balkh, Bamiyan, Herat, Bukhara, Samarkand and the Persianate world are not merely nostalgic memories; they are reminders that South Asia, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia once formed a richly connected civilizational zone. Modern borders interrupted these links. Iran-centred connectivity can partially restore them in contemporary form. It is a modern logistics expression of an old civilizational geography.

However, access remains difficult. Afghanistan's instability, Taliban rule, sanctions on Iran, infrastructure gaps, financing constraints and regional rivalries complicate movement. Central Asian states also balance multiple powers and may move cautiously. India must therefore combine diplomatic patience with operational seriousness. Opening access is not a one-time event; it is a long process of corridor-building, institutional coordination, commercial confidence and strategic persistence.

In conclusion, opening access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is one of the highest strategic purposes of India's Iran route. It allows India to overcome Pakistan's obstruction, support Afghanistan, engage Central Asia, expand Eurasian trade and preserve strategic autonomy. In the refined vocabulary of

grand strategy, the Iran route is India's *western gateway to the Afghan corridor and Central Asian heartland*.

11.3 Gwadar and Chabahar

Gwadar and Chabahar have become two of the most discussed ports in the geopolitics of the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the north-western Indian Ocean. Gwadar is located in Pakistan's Balochistan province and is closely associated with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. Chabahar is located in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province and is closely associated with India–Iran connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Their geographical proximity and external partnerships have made them symbols of a wider connectivity competition involving China, Pakistan, India and Iran.

The comparison between Gwadar and Chabahar must be handled with intellectual care. It is simplistic to describe them only as rival ports. They have different hinterlands, different political settings, different external sponsors and different strategic purposes. Gwadar is designed as a major node of China–Pakistan connectivity and as a potential access point for western China to the Arabian Sea. Chabahar is designed as India's access point to Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the INSTC. Yet because both are located in the same broad maritime region and are connected with rival strategic partnerships, comparison is inevitable.

Gwadar and Chabahar represent two different corridor imaginations. Gwadar looks north-east toward Pakistan's interior, Xinjiang and China's Belt and Road architecture. Chabahar looks north and north-east toward Iran's interior, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caspian region. Gwadar is embedded in the China–Pakistan strategic partnership; Chabahar is embedded in India–Iran cooperation. Gwadar is shaped by CPEC; Chabahar is shaped by Chabahar Agreement, India–Iran cooperation and INSTC-related possibilities. Thus, both ports are *geopolitical symbols of competing access strategies*.

Both ports also lie in sensitive Baloch regions. Gwadar is in Pakistan's Balochistan, where insurgency, local grievances and security problems have affected CPEC projects. Chabahar is in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan, a less-developed region also affected by border security concerns. This means that both ports face the challenge of converting peripheral coastal spaces into

strategic hubs. Infrastructure alone is not enough; local development, security, employment and inclusion are necessary for long-term success.

The strategic significance of the two ports also arises from their proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. This region is one of the world's most important energy and trade zones. Ports in this area can influence trade routes, naval calculations, energy movement and regional diplomacy. Therefore, Gwadar and Chabahar are not ordinary commercial ports; they are embedded in the maritime geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and West Asia.

For India, Chabahar is important because Gwadar gives China and Pakistan a strategic presence near the mouth of the Persian Gulf and close to India's western maritime approaches. India does not frame Chabahar as a military counter-port, but it cannot ignore the strategic implications of Gwadar under Chinese management. Chabahar gives India a constructive alternative presence in the same broad region. It prevents India from being absent in the emerging maritime-connectivity map of the Arabian Sea.

For Iran, Chabahar is important because it can develop Iran's south-eastern coast and provide access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran may not wish to convert Chabahar into an anti-Gwadar project because it must maintain relations with Pakistan and China. Tehran often prefers to present Chabahar as complementary to regional connectivity. Yet India's presence gives Chabahar a distinct geopolitical meaning, particularly in relation to Afghanistan and Pakistan's transit monopoly.

For Pakistan, Gwadar is an ambitious symbol of economic transformation, maritime depth and Chinese investment. Pakistan hopes that Gwadar will connect its economy with western China, Central Asia and the Arabian Sea. However, the port's success depends on security, local acceptance, road and rail connectivity, industrial development, water supply, power supply and actual cargo movement. Gwadar's symbolic importance is already high, but its full commercial realization remains an ongoing challenge.

In conclusion, Gwadar and Chabahar are not merely ports; they are *geopolitical mirrors*. Gwadar reflects China–Pakistan connectivity ambition; Chabahar reflects India–Iran access strategy. Their future will influence Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman and wider

Indian Ocean geopolitics. In the language of strategic geography, they are two maritime doors opening into two different continental visions.

11.3.1 Pakistan's Gwadar Port

Gwadar Port is one of Pakistan's most strategically important maritime projects. Located on Pakistan's south-western coast in Balochistan, facing the Arabian Sea, it occupies a position near the Gulf of Oman and the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz. Its geography gives it deep strategic significance because it lies close to major energy sea lanes and provides Pakistan with a potential maritime-commercial hub beyond Karachi and Port Qasim. In Pakistan's strategic imagination, Gwadar is a *southern maritime gateway* and a symbol of future economic transformation.

Gwadar's importance increased dramatically with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. CPEC made Gwadar a flagship node in China–Pakistan connectivity. The larger vision is to connect Gwadar with Pakistan's inland transport networks and ultimately with China's Xinjiang region. This would give China a route to the Arabian Sea and give Pakistan infrastructure investment, industrial zones, energy projects and improved transport networks. Gwadar is therefore central to the China–Pakistan strategic partnership.

For China, Gwadar carries multiple meanings. It offers a potential maritime foothold near the Persian Gulf, a possible alternative route for trade and energy movement, and a symbol of Belt and Road expansion. Although the actual commercial transformation of Gwadar has been slower than its strategic symbolism, the port remains important in Chinese regional calculations. It helps China project influence into the Arabian Sea and strengthens its long-term partnership with Pakistan.

For Pakistan, Gwadar is often presented as a solution to economic underdevelopment and regional marginalization. Balochistan is resource-rich but economically neglected. Gwadar is expected to generate jobs, trade, investment, logistics activity, industrial development and regional connectivity. However, local grievances remain serious. Many Baloch communities have complained about lack of employment, displacement, security restrictions, water shortages and inadequate local benefits. This shows that a port's strategic value must be matched by inclusive development.

Gwadar's security environment is a major challenge. Baloch insurgent groups have targeted CPEC-related projects, Chinese personnel and Pakistani security forces. Pakistan has heavily securitized the region to protect the port and Chinese investments. Yet security pressure without adequate local inclusion can deepen resentment. Therefore, Gwadar's future depends not only on cranes and roads but also on political accommodation, local development and governance legitimacy.

Gwadar also affects India's security perceptions. India views CPEC with deep concern because part of the corridor passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. India also watches China's expanding maritime presence in the Indian Ocean with caution. Gwadar under Chinese operational influence therefore appears to India as part of a wider pattern of Chinese strategic expansion. This does not mean Gwadar is automatically a naval base, but its potential dual-use implications cannot be ignored in strategic analysis.

Gwadar's relationship with Afghanistan and Central Asia is also important. Pakistan presents Gwadar as a route through which Afghanistan and Central Asian states can access the Arabian Sea. In theory, this gives Gwadar regional utility. In practice, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and India, border closures, security tensions and political distrust complicate this role. Afghanistan's recent interest in alternative routes through Iran shows that Gwadar and Pakistani routes cannot monopolize Afghan transit forever.

Gwadar also carries an energy-security dimension. Its proximity to the Persian Gulf and energy sea lanes makes it strategically attractive. Some Pakistani and Chinese discussions have imagined Gwadar as a future energy and logistics hub. However, such ambitions require pipelines, refineries, storage facilities, roads, railways, industrial users and stable security. Without these, geography remains potential rather than power.

In conclusion, Gwadar Port is Pakistan's most ambitious maritime-connectivity project and a central node of CPEC. It gives Pakistan strategic depth in the Arabian Sea and gives China a major corridor partner. Yet Gwadar faces challenges of security, local discontent, underdevelopment, limited cargo volume and geopolitical suspicion. In the language of regional strategy, Gwadar is Pakistan's *China-linked maritime ambition facing the test of local legitimacy and geopolitical mistrust*.

11.3.2 Iran's Chabahar Port

Iran's Chabahar Port is one of the most important instruments of India–Iran strategic cooperation. Located on Iran's south-eastern coast in Sistan and Baluchestan, facing the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar gives Iran direct access to the Indian Ocean region and gives India a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia without depending on Pakistan. Its location outside the inner Persian Gulf gives it additional strategic value. Chabahar is therefore a *maritime gateway*, a *continental access point* and a *corridor of strategic autonomy*.

Chabahar's importance for India lies in its ability to bypass Pakistan. Indian cargo can move by sea from Indian ports to Chabahar and then onward through Iran toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. This reduces Pakistan's transit leverage and gives India independent access to its extended neighbourhood. Unlike Gwadar, which is linked with China–Pakistan connectivity, Chabahar is linked with India–Iran–Afghanistan and India–Central Asia connectivity. It is an alternative route rather than a coercive route.

For Iran, Chabahar supports national development and regional relevance. Sistan and Baluchestan is one of Iran's less-developed provinces. Port development can generate trade, employment, logistics activity, infrastructure and regional integration. Chabahar also reduces Iran's dependence on Persian Gulf ports by strengthening its Gulf of Oman coast. It allows Iran to present itself as a constructive corridor state connecting India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the wider Eurasian space.

Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti Terminal is central to India's operational role. The long-term India–Iran contract for development and operation of the terminal gives India a more durable presence. This is significant because port projects require continuity, investment security and administrative predictability. Chabahar's importance lies not merely in its geography but in its institutionalization through agreements, operations and cargo movement.

Chabahar is especially important for Afghanistan. It provides Afghanistan with an alternative outlet to the sea and reduces dependence on Pakistan's routes. Indian humanitarian supplies and commercial cargo can move through Chabahar. Afghan exports can reach India and other markets through Iran. In this sense, Chabahar gives landlocked Afghanistan a degree of *transit*

sovereignty. This makes the port not merely an India–Iran project but a regional public good.

Chabahar is also connected with Central Asia and the INSTC. If linked effectively with Iran’s road and railway networks, it can serve as a southern gateway for Central Asian republics and a node in wider Eurasian connectivity. It can support movement toward Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, the Caspian region and Russia. This gives Chabahar a long-term strategic horizon beyond Afghanistan.

The port’s humanitarian role strengthens its legitimacy. Chabahar has been used for movement of food assistance to Afghanistan. A port that carries relief supplies acquires moral significance. It becomes a corridor of *humanitarian connectivity*, not merely a platform of strategic competition. This is one reason India presents Chabahar in developmental and regional terms rather than narrowly as a counter to Gwadar.

However, Chabahar faces constraints. U.S. sanctions on Iran complicate investment, banking, insurance and private-sector participation. Infrastructure delays, especially rail links and hinterland connectivity, reduce its immediate commercial potential. Afghanistan’s political uncertainty after the Taliban’s return creates further complications. Iran’s own border-security issues in Sistan and Baluchestan also require attention. Therefore, Chabahar’s promise is strong but its realization requires *strategic patience*.

In conclusion, Chabahar Port is Iran’s strategic gift to India’s westward connectivity and India’s strategic investment in Iran’s corridor role. It opens access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, reduces dependence on Pakistan, supports Iran’s regional development and strengthens India–Iran cooperation. In elevated geopolitical language, Chabahar is the *maritime key through which India unlocks its continental west*.

11.3.3 China–Pakistan and India–Iran Connectivity Competition

China–Pakistan and India–Iran connectivity competition is one of the most significant features of contemporary regional geopolitics. On one side stands CPEC, linking China with Pakistan and Gwadar; on the other side stands India–Iran cooperation through Chabahar and potentially the INSTC. These are not identical projects, but they represent competing corridor visions in the same broad region. The competition is not only about ports; it is about influence, access, markets, routes, strategic autonomy and regional order.

The China–Pakistan connectivity model is anchored in CPEC. It is a flagship component of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and seeks to connect Gwadar with Pakistan’s highways, railways, energy projects and eventually western China. For Pakistan, CPEC is presented as a development corridor; for China, it is a strategic-economic corridor toward the Arabian Sea. This partnership strengthens Pakistan’s infrastructure but also deepens China’s influence in Pakistan’s economy and security environment.

The India–Iran connectivity model is anchored in Chabahar. India’s purpose is to reach Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia without depending on Pakistan. Iran’s purpose is to develop Chabahar and strengthen its role as a transit state. Unlike CPEC, which is heavily China-funded and Pakistan-centred, Chabahar is more limited in scale but strategically precise. It is designed to solve India’s access problem and support Afghanistan’s transit diversification. This makes it a corridor of *strategic necessity*.

The competition between these models is shaped by geography. Gwadar and Chabahar are located relatively close to each other on the Arabian Sea–Gulf of Oman maritime arc. Gwadar looks toward Pakistan’s inland routes and China’s western regions; Chabahar looks toward Iran’s internal routes, Afghanistan and Central Asia. The two ports therefore represent two different directions of continental access. Gwadar is north-eastward through Pakistan; Chabahar is northward and north-eastward through Iran and Afghanistan.

China–Pakistan connectivity is also viewed in India through the lens of sovereignty. India objects to CPEC because it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. This makes CPEC unacceptable to India as a legitimate regional project. Chabahar, by contrast, does not raise such sovereignty objections for India. It is based on bilateral and trilateral agreements and is framed as a route of regional development. Therefore, India’s support for Chabahar is also a statement about sovereignty-respecting connectivity.

The competition also involves Afghanistan. Pakistan has historically sought to influence Afghanistan and make it dependent on Pakistani routes. Chabahar gives Afghanistan another option. If Afghanistan uses Chabahar and Iranian routes, Pakistan’s transit monopoly weakens. This reduces Pakistan’s leverage and increases Afghanistan’s economic autonomy. Therefore, Chabahar affects the strategic balance between Pakistan and Afghanistan as well.

Central Asia is another arena of competition. China has built strong connectivity and economic influence in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative. India seeks access to the same region through Iran and INSTC-related routes. Central Asian republics generally prefer multiple options and do not wish to depend exclusively on one major power. Chabahar and INSTC can therefore support Central Asia's *multi-vector diplomacy* by providing another southern route.

The competition also has a maritime dimension. China's presence in Gwadar contributes to India's concerns about the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. India does not want Chinese strategic influence to surround its maritime environment. Chabahar gives India a friendly connectivity presence west of Pakistan. It does not match Gwadar in the same way, nor should it be militarized in interpretation, but it does provide a political and logistical counterweight.

However, the competition should not be exaggerated into a simple zero-sum rivalry. There are theoretical possibilities of complementarity between Gwadar and Chabahar, especially for regional trade. Iran and Pakistan have occasionally spoken of cooperation. Afghanistan and Central Asia may benefit from multiple routes rather than exclusive blocs. Yet political mistrust, India–Pakistan rivalry, China–India competition and sanctions on Iran make real complementarity difficult. Therefore, the ports remain more competitive than cooperative in strategic imagination.

China–Pakistan connectivity has advantages of scale, financing and political commitment, but it faces problems of debt concerns, local grievances, Baloch insurgency, security risks and uneven local development. India–Iran connectivity has advantages of strategic legitimacy, Afghanistan access and India's goodwill, but it faces sanctions, infrastructure delay and financing constraints. Both models therefore face limitations. The future will depend on implementation, security and commercial viability.

The competition also reflects two different political styles of connectivity. China's model is capital-intensive, state-driven and infrastructure-heavy. India's model is slower, consultative, limited but sovereignty-conscious. Iran's role gives India's model geographical depth, while Pakistan's role gives China's model access to the Arabian Sea. These models will shape regional trade and strategic imagination for decades.

In conclusion, China–Pakistan and India–Iran connectivity competition is a contest between two corridor visions. Gwadar and CPEC represent China–Pakistan maritime-continental ambition; Chabahar and India–Iran cooperation represent India’s alternative access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. In the refined language of geopolitics, Gwadar and Chabahar are the *twin maritime symbols of Asia’s emerging corridor rivalry*.

Concluding Observation

India’s strategic use of the Iran route is fundamentally linked to reducing dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes and opening access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Pakistan’s transit denial created a structural problem for India; Iran’s geography offers a strategic solution. Chabahar transforms India’s maritime reach into continental access and gives Afghanistan and Central Asia an alternative to Pakistan-dominated routes.

Gwadar and Chabahar represent the most visible maritime expression of this wider geopolitical contest. Gwadar is linked with Pakistan’s China-backed connectivity strategy; Chabahar is linked with India’s Iran-backed alternative corridor. Gwadar reflects China–Pakistan ambition; Chabahar reflects India–Iran strategic access. The two ports are not merely infrastructure projects; they are symbols of two competing regional futures. In the broader India–Iran relationship, Chabahar is therefore not an isolated port but a *strategic counter-geometry* to Pakistan-controlled access and China–Pakistan corridor politics.

11.4 Iran’s Balancing Between India and Pakistan

Iran’s balancing between India and Pakistan is one of the most sophisticated features of its South Asian diplomacy. Tehran cannot afford to treat India and Pakistan through a simplistic friend–enemy framework because both countries matter to Iran in different ways. India offers Iran a large market, civilizational familiarity, energy partnership, Chabahar cooperation, access to the Indian Ocean economy, and a route into Asian multipolarity. Pakistan, on the other hand, is Iran’s immediate eastern neighbour, a Muslim-majority state, a border-security partner, a trade partner, and a country whose internal instability can directly affect Iran’s Sistan and Baluchestan province. Therefore, Iran’s policy is not one of exclusive alignment but one of *calibrated regional balancing*.

Iran's balancing is shaped first by geography. India is strategically important but geographically separated from Iran by the Arabian Sea and Pakistan. Pakistan is smaller in economic weight than India, but it shares a direct border with Iran. In diplomacy, physical adjacency creates unavoidable obligations. Iran may value India's market and Chabahar partnership, but it cannot ignore Pakistan's border, Balochistan region, narcotics flows, refugee movements, smuggling networks, militant activity and energy needs. Hence, Tehran's diplomacy must combine *strategic preference* with *neighbourhood compulsion*.

Iran also balances because India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed rivals. Any major India–Pakistan confrontation could destabilize South Asia, disturb Afghanistan, affect energy routes and complicate Iran's regional environment. Iran usually prefers restraint, dialogue and de-escalation between the two South Asian rivals. It cannot openly side with Pakistan in a way that destroys its India relationship, nor can it side with India in a way that permanently alienates Pakistan. This diplomatic caution is the natural behaviour of a state located between multiple regional pressures.

Historically, Iran under the Shah was closer to Pakistan because both were aligned with Western-backed security structures. India's non-alignment and Pakistan's membership in U.S.-supported security arrangements created a Cold War distance between New Delhi and Tehran. However, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the post-Cold War transformation, Iran's strategic worldview changed. Tehran became more willing to engage India independently, especially over Afghanistan, energy and connectivity. Yet Pakistan did not disappear from Iran's strategic map. Thus, Iran's modern policy combines *post-revolutionary independence* with *borderland realism*.

Afghanistan has been a major factor in Iran's balancing. In the 1990s, Iran and India shared concerns about the Taliban, while Pakistan supported the Taliban's rise. This produced India–Iran convergence. Yet Iran could not permanently sever relations with Pakistan because Afghanistan's future, refugee flows, narcotics and border management required dialogue with Islamabad. This pattern continues even today. Iran may cooperate with India over Chabahar and Afghanistan, but it still maintains Pakistan channels because Afghanistan's stability cannot be managed by excluding Pakistan altogether.

Iran's balancing also reflects its relations with China. Pakistan is China's closest South Asian partner, and China has also become a major partner for Iran, especially under sanctions. China's investment in Gwadar and Pakistan's CPEC gives Beijing a deep presence in Pakistan, while China's economic role in Iran also matters. Iran must therefore avoid policies that unnecessarily antagonize China–Pakistan interests, even while deepening cooperation with India at Chabahar. This produces a triangular diplomatic complexity: Iran cooperates with India, manages Pakistan, and accommodates China.

The Chabahar–Gwadar comparison adds another layer to Iran's balancing. Chabahar is closely linked with India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, while Gwadar is tied to Pakistan and China. Iran does not officially want Chabahar to appear as a hostile rival to Gwadar because that would create unnecessary tension with Pakistan and China. Yet India naturally sees Chabahar as a strategic alternative to Pakistan-controlled routes and China–Pakistan corridor politics. Iran's task is to present Chabahar as *inclusive connectivity* while allowing India to use it for *strategic access*. This is a delicate diplomatic art.

Iran's balancing is also affected by sanctions. Under sanctions, Iran needs markets, trade routes, banking options, energy buyers and diplomatic partners. India is valuable because of its large economy and historical willingness to maintain relations with Iran despite external pressure. Pakistan is valuable because of border trade, electricity needs, informal commerce and possible energy cooperation. Sanctions therefore push Iran to avoid unnecessary alienation of either India or Pakistan. Tehran's balancing is not only political; it is also economic survival diplomacy.

At the same time, Iran's balancing has limits. When Iranian security forces are attacked by groups operating across the Pakistan border, Tehran's patience weakens. When Pakistan fears militants operating from Iranian territory, Islamabad reacts. The January 2024 exchange of strikes showed that Iran–Pakistan relations can quickly move from diplomatic engagement to military tension. This demonstrates that Iran's balancing is constantly tested by security realities in the Balochistan borderland.

For India, Iran's balancing should be understood with maturity. India cannot expect Iran to abandon Pakistan because Pakistan is Iran's neighbour. India's aim should be to build such strong independent stakes with Iran that Tehran

continues to value India even while maintaining necessary relations with Pakistan. This is precisely what Chabahar, INSTC, energy dialogue, cultural cooperation and regional consultation can achieve. India's Iran policy must therefore be *interest-based, patient and non-maximalist*.

In conclusion, Iran's balancing between India and Pakistan is a product of geography, history, security, economics, sanctions, Afghanistan, China and regional stability. Iran sees India as a major Asian partner and Pakistan as an unavoidable neighbour. It must therefore practise *multi-directional diplomacy*. In the refined vocabulary of geopolitics, Iran's South Asian policy is a continuous exercise in *balancing strategic attraction toward India with neighbourhood compulsion toward Pakistan*.

11.4.1 Iran's Economic Relations With Pakistan

Iran's economic relations with Pakistan are important because they arise from immediate geography, shared border markets, energy complementarity, informal trade, border livelihoods and the possibility of wider regional connectivity. Although Pakistan's economy is much smaller than India's, its physical proximity gives it a special economic relevance for Iran. Border trade, electricity supply, fuel, agricultural goods, food products, livestock, cement, construction materials and consumer items form part of this economic interaction. The relationship is not merely a matter of high diplomacy; it is also a matter of borderland survival.

Iran and Pakistan have repeatedly expressed ambitions to increase bilateral trade. The stated target of raising trade to much higher levels reflects recognition that actual economic exchange remains below potential. Both countries have large populations, shared borders, complementary needs and regional connectivity interests. Pakistan needs energy, electricity and fuel; Iran needs markets, border stability and trade outlets. Yet the full potential has not been realized because of sanctions, banking restrictions, poor infrastructure, smuggling, weak formal trade mechanisms and political distrust.

Energy has long been the most important economic possibility between Iran and Pakistan. Iran possesses enormous gas reserves, while Pakistan faces chronic energy shortages. The Iran–Pakistan gas pipeline, originally part of the larger Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline vision, reflected this complementarity. However, sanctions, financing problems, U.S. pressure,

pricing disputes and Pakistan's implementation delays have prevented full realization. This shows that Iran–Pakistan economic relations are rich in potential but heavily constrained by external and internal pressures.

Electricity trade is another important area. Iran has supplied electricity to parts of Pakistan's Balochistan region, where energy shortages are serious. Such cooperation is practical and local. It helps border communities and creates interdependence. In border diplomacy, electricity lines can sometimes be as important as embassies because they directly affect daily life. Iran's economic relationship with Pakistan therefore includes both strategic projects and small but meaningful local exchanges.

Border markets have also been promoted as instruments of economic cooperation. Formal border markets can reduce smuggling, generate employment, support local communities and create legal trade. This is especially important in the Balochistan region, where poverty and underdevelopment often strengthen informal and illegal networks. Economic formalization can support security. In this sense, Iran–Pakistan trade is also a tool of *border stabilization*.

However, sanctions on Iran severely complicate formal trade. Banks hesitate to process payments; companies fear compliance risks; insurance and shipping become difficult; and large projects face financing problems. As a result, informal trade often becomes more important than formal trade. This weakens state revenue and encourages smuggling. Iran and Pakistan both understand that economic cooperation requires banking channels, customs facilitation and legal trade mechanisms.

Pakistan's economic relationship with Iran also exists alongside Pakistan's dependence on the Gulf and China. Pakistan receives remittances, financial support and energy from Gulf countries, and it receives investment and infrastructure support from China. These relationships limit how far Pakistan can go in defying sanctions on Iran. Therefore, Islamabad's economic engagement with Tehran is constrained by its external dependencies. Iran understands this limitation but still seeks to preserve economic ties.

Iran's economic relations with Pakistan also affect India indirectly. If Iran becomes economically closer to Pakistan in ways that reduce India's access or strategic value, New Delhi may worry. However, basic Iran–Pakistan trade need not be viewed negatively by India. Stable Iran–Pakistan border trade can

reduce insecurity in regions near Chabahar and Gwadar. India's concern is not ordinary trade; its concern is any strategic alignment that weakens Chabahar, strengthens anti-India networks or gives Pakistan excessive influence over Iran's regional choices.

The economic dimension also includes connectivity. Pakistan has shown interest in routes linking it with Iran, Turkey, Central Asia and beyond. Iran, for its part, wants to be a corridor state. In theory, Pakistan and Iran can cooperate in regional transit. Yet India's use of Chabahar and Pakistan's use of Gwadar create overlapping and sometimes competitive corridor visions. Iran must manage both without appearing subordinate to either.

In conclusion, Iran's economic relations with Pakistan are driven by energy needs, border trade, local livelihoods, electricity supply, transport possibilities and sanctions-era economic pragmatism. These ties are important but constrained. They do not eliminate Iran's interest in India, nor do they make Pakistan Iran's exclusive partner. In the elevated language of economic diplomacy, Iran–Pakistan economic relations are a *neighbourhood necessity shaped by energy complementarity, border dependence and sanctions-induced limitation*.

11.4.2 Security Issues in Balochistan Region

Security issues in the Balochistan region represent one of the most serious challenges in Iran–Pakistan relations and a significant factor in India–Iran strategic calculations. The Balochistan region stretches across Pakistan's Balochistan province, Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province and parts of Afghanistan. It is geographically vast, resource-rich, underdeveloped, ethnically connected and politically sensitive. Its deserts, mountains, coastal stretches and porous frontiers make it difficult to govern. This region is a classic *frontier zone*, where state authority, tribal networks, smuggling routes, insurgent movements and external strategic interests intersect.

For Iran, Sistan and Baluchestan is one of the most sensitive provinces. It borders Pakistan and Afghanistan, contains a largely Sunni Baloch population within a Shia-majority state, and has faced militant attacks by groups such as Jaish al-Adl. Iranian authorities view these groups as serious threats to national security. Attacks on security forces, police stations and Revolutionary Guard facilities have made the province a recurring security

concern. The fact that some groups are alleged to operate across the Pakistan border makes the issue deeply diplomatic as well as domestic.

For Pakistan, Balochistan is equally sensitive. It is Pakistan's largest province by area, rich in minerals and strategically important because it contains Gwadar Port. Yet it has long faced insurgency, grievances over resource distribution, accusations of political marginalization, enforced disappearances, militancy and attacks on Chinese and Pakistani targets. Pakistan worries that separatist groups may use cross-border spaces, including Iran or Afghanistan, for shelter. Thus, both Iran and Pakistan accuse hostile groups of exploiting the frontier.

The January 2024 cross-border strikes between Iran and Pakistan dramatically revealed the volatility of the Balochistan security problem. Iran struck alleged Jaish al-Adl positions in Pakistan; Pakistan retaliated against what it described as separatist militant hideouts inside Iran. This rare exchange showed that local militancy can escalate into interstate confrontation. Although both countries later moved toward de-escalation, the episode demonstrated the fragility of border security.

Chabahar's location makes the issue even more important for India. Chabahar is situated in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province. If the province faces serious instability, attacks or militant activity, the security of port operations and associated transport corridors can be affected. India's connectivity strategy depends on the safety of Chabahar and its hinterland routes. Therefore, Balochistan security is not merely an Iran–Pakistan matter; it is connected with India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Gwadar's location in Pakistan's Balochistan creates a parallel challenge for China and Pakistan. Attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan have targeted Chinese interests, CPEC projects and security personnel. Thus, both Gwadar and Chabahar are located in sensitive Baloch regions. This gives the Gwadar–Chabahar comparison an internal-security dimension. The success of both ports depends not only on external strategy but also on local stability, development and legitimacy.

Narcotics trafficking further worsens the security environment. Afghanistan-origin drugs have historically moved through Iran, Pakistan and other regional routes. Smuggling networks often overlap with weapons trafficking, illegal migration, corruption and militant financing. Iran has borne a heavy

burden in counter-narcotics operations. Pakistan also faces the consequences of drug trafficking and border crime. In Balochistan, criminal economies weaken state authority and complicate security management.

Underdevelopment is another root of insecurity. Border regions in both Iran and Pakistan have often suffered from poverty, weak infrastructure, unemployment and perceived neglect. When local communities do not benefit from ports, minerals or trade, resentment can grow. Large projects such as Gwadar and Chabahar must therefore include local development, employment, water supply, education, healthcare and political inclusion. Security cannot be achieved by force alone; it requires *developmental legitimacy*.

The Balochistan security issue also creates diplomatic mistrust. Iran suspects that anti-Iran militants find shelter across the border; Pakistan suspects that anti-Pakistan militants use Iranian territory. Such accusations can weaken cooperation. Both states need intelligence coordination, border fencing, joint patrols, formal crossings, economic development and mechanisms for rapid crisis management. Without such mechanisms, local incidents can become diplomatic crises.

India must approach the Balochistan issue carefully. India's interest is in the stability of Chabahar and the safe functioning of the Iran route. India should avoid actions or rhetoric that allow Pakistan to accuse India of destabilizing Balochistan. India's best strategy is to support legal connectivity, regional development and stable corridors. Chabahar's legitimacy depends on being seen as a project of trade and humanitarian access, not covert destabilization.

In conclusion, security issues in the Balochistan region are a major test for Iran–Pakistan relations and India–Iran connectivity. Militancy, smuggling, narcotics, underdevelopment and cross-border suspicion threaten both Chabahar and Gwadar. In the refined vocabulary of regional security, Balochistan is the *restive frontier where local grievances, port geopolitics and interstate suspicion converge*.

11.4.3 Iran's Diplomatic Balancing

Iran's diplomatic balancing between India and Pakistan is a careful exercise in managing asymmetrical interests. India offers Iran a major civilizational partner, a large market, Chabahar cooperation, energy possibilities and access to Asian multipolarity. Pakistan offers Iran immediate neighbourhood

management, border security coordination, Muslim-world diplomacy, trade, electricity cooperation and unavoidable geopolitical adjacency. Iran must therefore keep both relationships alive while preventing one from destroying the other. This is *equidistance with differentiated engagement*.

Iran's balancing is not neutral in the mathematical sense. Tehran's relations with India and Pakistan are different in content. With India, Iran emphasizes Chabahar, energy, civilizational links, trade, culture, INSTC and access to Central Asia. With Pakistan, Iran emphasizes border security, trade, energy, Muslim-neighbour diplomacy and crisis management. These are different baskets of engagement. Diplomatic balancing does not mean identical relations; it means simultaneous management of different interests.

Iran's balancing has become more complex because India and Pakistan are hostile neighbours. Any statement on Kashmir, terrorism, Afghanistan or India-Pakistan crises can be interpreted sharply. Iran has sometimes expressed views that India has found uncomfortable, especially when religious or Kashmir-related issues enter Iranian discourse. At the same time, Iran values India's partnership and generally avoids letting such issues permanently damage the relationship. This reflects the tension between ideological expression and strategic pragmatism in Iranian diplomacy.

Afghanistan is central to Iran's balancing. Iran has cooperated with India in supporting Afghan stability and connectivity, especially through Chabahar. Yet Iran must also engage Pakistan because Pakistan has influence in Afghanistan and shares borders with both Afghanistan and Iran. Tehran cannot build an Afghanistan policy with India alone. It must manage Pakistan, Taliban authorities, Central Asian states, Russia, China and other actors. This makes Iran's Afghanistan diplomacy inherently multi-directional.

China also affects Iran's balancing. Pakistan is China's close ally; China is also an important partner for Iran, especially under sanctions. Iran therefore avoids turning Chabahar into an explicitly anti-China or anti-Pakistan project. Tehran may welcome India's role, but it also maintains ties with Beijing and Islamabad. This creates a diplomatic triangle in which Iran seeks maximum benefit without becoming trapped in Sino-Indian rivalry.

Iran's balancing is also visible in port diplomacy. Chabahar is developed with Indian participation; Gwadar is linked with Pakistan and China. Iran has at times suggested that regional ports can be complementary rather than hostile.

Such language allows Iran to avoid unnecessary confrontation with Pakistan while continuing India-linked Chabahar development. This is a classic example of *diplomatic ambiguity used for strategic flexibility*.

In the economic field, Iran must balance opportunities. India offers a large market and technological capacity, but sanctions have reduced energy trade and banking channels. Pakistan offers proximity and border commerce, but its economy is smaller and financially constrained. Iran therefore cannot rely exclusively on either. It must diversify economic relations across India, Pakistan, China, Russia, Central Asia and the Gulf. This broader diversification supports its diplomatic balancing.

Iran's balancing is also shaped by the Islamic world. Pakistan has strong ties with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, while Iran has had rivalries with Saudi Arabia and some Gulf actors. Pakistan often tries to avoid taking sides in Iran–Saudi rivalry, but its military and economic links with Saudi Arabia are significant. Iran understands this and treats Pakistan with caution. India, by contrast, maintains good relations with both Iran and Gulf Arab states. This gives India and Iran space for pragmatic engagement, though India too must balance its West Asian relationships.

Security crises test Iran's balancing. During the 2024 Iran–Pakistan strikes, Tehran had to defend its security interests without allowing escalation into prolonged conflict. During India–Pakistan tensions, Iran generally calls for restraint. In Afghanistan, Iran works with multiple actors while protecting its interests. Balancing is therefore not a static doctrine; it is a continuous crisis-management practice.

For India, Iran's diplomatic balancing should not be misread as unreliability. It is a consequence of Iran's geography and constraints. India itself practises multi-alignment by maintaining relations with the United States, Russia, Iran, Israel, Gulf states and Central Asian republics. Iran's balancing between India and Pakistan is similar in logic, though different in circumstances. Mature diplomacy requires accepting that partners have multiple relationships.

India's task is to deepen the India–Iran relationship so that Iran's balancing does not harm Indian interests. This requires sustained investment in Chabahar, trade facilitation, cultural diplomacy, academic exchanges, energy dialogue, INSTC cooperation, Afghanistan consultation and high-level political contact. The stronger the India–Iran relationship becomes, the less

likely Iran is to tilt toward Pakistan in ways damaging to India. Influence is built through presence, not expectation.

In conclusion, Iran's diplomatic balancing between India and Pakistan is a product of geography, sanctions, Afghanistan, China, border security, Islamic-world politics and strategic autonomy. Iran cannot choose India against Pakistan absolutely, nor Pakistan against India absolutely. It must engage both. In the elevated language of diplomacy, Iran's policy is a *carefully choreographed equilibrium between India's strategic attraction and Pakistan's neighbouring compulsion*.

Concluding Observation

Iran's balancing between India and Pakistan is one of the most important realities of regional geopolitics. Iran values India for Chabahar, energy, culture, trade, Central Asian access and multipolar cooperation. It values Pakistan because of shared borders, economic needs, security management and Islamic-neighbour diplomacy. The Balochistan region, with its militancy, underdevelopment, narcotics and border tensions, makes Pakistan unavoidable for Iran. At the same time, Chabahar and India's Eurasian strategy make India indispensable.

For India, the correct approach is not to demand that Iran abandon Pakistan, but to make India–Iran cooperation sufficiently valuable that Tehran consistently protects Indian interests. Chabahar, INSTC, Afghanistan consultation, cultural diplomacy and economic engagement are the instruments for this purpose. Iran's balancing is not a weakness; it is a regional necessity. In the broader framework of India–Iran relations, Pakistan remains the *neighbouring constraint*, while India remains the *strategic opportunity*. Iran's diplomacy lies in managing both without surrendering its own autonomy.

Chapter 12:

China Factor in India–Iran Geopolitics

The *China factor* has become one of the most decisive and increasingly intricate elements in India–Iran geopolitics. China's rise has transformed the strategic geography of Asia, the Indian Ocean, West Asia, Central Asia and Eurasia. For India, China is not merely a neighbouring power; it is a continental rival, a maritime competitor, an economic giant, a technological challenger and a principal partner of Pakistan. For Iran, China is a major economic partner, an energy buyer, an infrastructure investor, a diplomatic supporter against Western pressure, and a potential strategic counterweight to the United States. Therefore, the rise of China creates both opportunity and anxiety in India–Iran relations.

China's growing role in West Asia has changed the older regional order. For decades, the United States was the dominant external power in the Gulf and wider Middle East. China, however, entered the region through a different route: trade, energy, infrastructure, finance, technology, ports, telecommunications and diplomatic mediation. Unlike Western powers, China generally avoids open ideological intervention and presents itself as a partner of *non-interference*, *developmental cooperation* and *mutual benefit*. This language appeals to many regional states that seek economic modernization without political lectures. Yet behind this apparently economic approach lies a deep *geostrategic design*.

For India, China's rise in West Asia is important because India also has profound interests in the same region. West Asia is vital for India's energy security, diaspora welfare, trade, remittances, maritime routes, Islamic-world diplomacy, counter-terrorism and connectivity to Central Asia. China's expanding presence in Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Oman, Qatar and Pakistan creates a competitive environment for India. India must therefore understand China's West Asian engagement not as a distant issue, but as a direct factor affecting Indian strategic autonomy.

Iran occupies a special place in this China factor. Iran is a major energy state, a gateway to the Persian Gulf, Caspian region, Central Asia and Caucasus,

and a country under long-term Western sanctions. These conditions make Iran attractive to China. China can purchase Iranian oil, invest in infrastructure, support Iran diplomatically, and use Iran as a node in Eurasian connectivity. However, Iran also knows that excessive dependence on China can reduce its autonomy. Thus, Iran's China policy is a combination of *strategic necessity*, *economic compulsion* and *diplomatic hedging*.

India must study China–Iran cooperation carefully. If China becomes too dominant in Iran's economy, infrastructure or strategic planning, India's space in Chabahar, INSTC and Afghanistan-related connectivity could shrink. At the same time, India cannot expect Iran to ignore China because sanctions and global power shifts have made Beijing indispensable to Tehran. Therefore, India's task is not to oppose every China–Iran interaction, but to ensure that India–Iran cooperation remains sufficiently valuable, independent and durable. In the refined vocabulary of geopolitics, China is the *third strategic shadow* over India–Iran relations.

12.1 China's Rise in West Asia

China's rise in West Asia is one of the most important transformations of contemporary international relations. West Asia, particularly the Persian Gulf, has long been associated with oil, gas, maritime chokepoints, religious politics, great-power rivalry, arms markets and strategic instability. China entered this region primarily through energy and trade, but its role has gradually expanded into infrastructure, technology, finance, diplomacy and security dialogues. This expansion has created a new pattern of *commercially driven geopolitical penetration*.

China's West Asia policy rests on a careful balance. Beijing maintains relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Turkey, Qatar, Iraq and Oman. It does not publicly choose one regional bloc against another. Instead, it presents itself as a partner of all. This has given China unusual diplomatic flexibility. It buys oil from Saudi Arabia and Iran; builds infrastructure in the Gulf; cooperates with Israel in technology and trade; develops ties with Turkey; and maintains a strategic partnership with Pakistan. This broad engagement allows China to maximize economic gains while minimizing political entanglement.

China's rise has been facilitated by regional demand. Many West Asian states seek economic diversification, technology, infrastructure, ports, railways,

industrial parks, telecommunications, renewable energy and investment. China offers capital, construction capacity and fast project execution. In return, China receives energy security, market access, diplomatic support and strategic influence. This exchange creates a powerful foundation for China's regional role.

The decline or perceived inconsistency of American engagement has also created space for China. Many Gulf and West Asian states continue to depend on the United States for security, but they increasingly diversify economic and diplomatic relations. China does not yet replace the United States as a security provider, but it has become an essential economic partner. This distinction is important. China's influence in West Asia is not based primarily on military alliances; it is based on *geo-economic embeddedness*.

China's rise in West Asia also affects India. India has strong historical, economic and energy ties with the region. Millions of Indians work in the Gulf, and West Asian energy remains central to India's economy. If China becomes the dominant economic and diplomatic power in the region, India's bargaining space may narrow. India must therefore strengthen its own West Asian diplomacy while maintaining relations with Iran, Gulf Arab states, Israel and the United States. China's rise forces India to practise *multi-vector West Asia policy*.

12.1.1 China's Energy Interests

China's energy interests are the foundation of its West Asia policy. China is the world's largest energy consumer and one of the largest importers of crude oil. Its industrialization, urbanization, transport system, petrochemical sector and manufacturing economy require enormous energy supplies. Although China has expanded renewable energy, electric vehicles and domestic production, imported oil and gas remain essential. West Asia, especially the Gulf region, therefore occupies a central position in China's energy security.

The Persian Gulf is vital because it contains some of the world's largest proven oil and gas reserves. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman are major energy actors. China imports large quantities of crude oil from Gulf and West Asian producers. This creates a deep relationship between China's economic growth and West Asian stability. Any disruption in the Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Red Sea or Arabian

Sea can affect Chinese energy security. Thus, China cannot remain indifferent to West Asian geopolitics.

Iran is important in this energy picture because it possesses vast oil and natural gas reserves. Sanctions have reduced Iran's formal access to global markets, but China has remained one of the most important buyers of Iranian oil. For Iran, China provides revenue, diplomatic breathing space and economic survival. For China, Iranian oil offers supply diversification and often favourable pricing under sanctions conditions. This creates a relationship of *energy interdependence under sanctions pressure*.

China's energy interests are not limited to buying oil. Beijing also seeks participation in upstream development, refining, petrochemicals, pipelines, LNG, storage, shipping, energy finance and technology. In Gulf countries, China has developed partnerships in oil refining, petrochemical complexes, clean energy, nuclear cooperation and renewable energy. This broadens China's role from buyer to partner. A simple buyer can be replaced; a partner embedded in infrastructure becomes more influential.

Energy also links China's West Asia policy with maritime security. Oil and gas from the Gulf travel through the Strait of Hormuz, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, Strait of Malacca and South China Sea. These sea lanes are vulnerable to conflict, piracy, naval rivalry and chokepoint disruption. China's concern about the Strait of Malacca has often been discussed as the *Malacca dilemma*. To reduce vulnerability, China seeks diversified routes, overland corridors, ports, pipelines and friendly maritime access. Gwadar under CPEC, while not replacing sea lanes, forms part of this larger strategic imagination.

For India, China's energy interests have direct implications. India also depends heavily on West Asian energy. Therefore, India and China are both energy consumers in the same region. They are not always direct rivals in oil markets, but their strategic interests overlap. If China gains deeper influence over Gulf energy infrastructure, shipping, ports and diplomatic mediation, India must respond by strengthening its own energy diplomacy. India must preserve diversified supplies, strategic petroleum reserves, refinery flexibility and maritime security cooperation.

China's energy interests also shape its approach to Iran. Beijing does not want Iran to collapse, because instability in Iran could threaten Gulf security and energy flows. At the same time, China does not want to be dragged into Iran's

conflicts with the United States, Israel or Gulf rivals. Therefore, China's Iran policy is cautious. It supports Iran diplomatically, buys energy and signs strategic agreements, but avoids military commitments that could endanger wider Chinese interests. This is *risk-managed partnership*.

The deeper geopolitical meaning is clear: China's energy interests have transformed West Asia from a distant region into a strategic necessity for Beijing. Energy draws China into Gulf diplomacy, Iran relations, Saudi relations, maritime routes and regional mediation. In the language of energy geopolitics, West Asia is China's *hydrocarbon lifeline*, while Iran is one of its most sensitive and sanctions-conditioned energy partners.

12.1.2 China's Belt and Road Initiative

China's *Belt and Road Initiative* is one of the most ambitious connectivity projects of the twenty-first century. Announced in 2013, it seeks to build networks of infrastructure, trade, finance, digital connectivity, industrial cooperation and people-to-people exchange across Asia, Europe, Africa and beyond. In West Asia, the BRI has special importance because the region lies between East Asia, Europe, Africa, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. It is a *geographical hinge* in China's global connectivity vision.

The BRI in West Asia includes ports, roads, railways, industrial parks, energy projects, telecommunications, logistics zones and financial cooperation. China has invested or participated in projects in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Israel and Pakistan. The initiative allows Beijing to connect energy security with infrastructure diplomacy. It also gives Chinese companies major construction contracts and gives Chinese finance a long-term regional presence.

Iran is important for the BRI because it connects West Asia with Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Caspian region and Europe. Iran's geography makes it a natural corridor state. Chinese planners see Iran as part of potential east-west and north-south connectivity networks. Iran can link China with West Asia, Turkey, Europe and the Indian Ocean. However, sanctions have limited the full realization of China's infrastructure plans in Iran. Thus, Iran is strategically attractive but operationally complicated.

Pakistan's role in the BRI is even more visible through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. CPEC connects China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea. For China, it offers a potential route toward

the Indian Ocean; for Pakistan, it promises infrastructure, energy and industrial development. For India, however, CPEC is unacceptable because it passes through territory India considers illegally occupied by Pakistan. This makes the BRI not merely an economic initiative but a sovereignty and security issue for India.

The BRI's West Asian dimension also includes port diplomacy. Ports are no longer only commercial facilities; they are instruments of influence. Gwadar, Duqm, Jebel Ali-related logistics, Haifa-related discussions, Suez Economic Zone projects and Gulf port cooperation all show how China uses maritime infrastructure to build influence. The maritime part of the BRI, often called the *Maritime Silk Road*, overlaps with India's area of strategic concern in the Indian Ocean. This makes the BRI a direct factor in India's maritime strategy.

The BRI also has a digital dimension. China's telecommunications, surveillance systems, e-commerce platforms, satellite cooperation, artificial intelligence tools and digital-payment systems are expanding across West Asia. This produces what may be called *digital corridor politics*. Infrastructure is not only roads and ports; it also includes data cables, cloud systems, smart-city technologies and digital governance. India must pay attention to this because digital influence can become strategic influence.

China presents the BRI as a project of mutual development and connectivity. Many developing countries welcome infrastructure investment because they need roads, railways, ports and power plants. However, critics argue that the BRI may create debt dependence, strategic leverage, lack of transparency and unequal benefits. India's official concern has consistently emphasized sovereignty, transparency, financial responsibility and respect for territorial integrity. Therefore, India's response to the BRI is not blind opposition to connectivity, but opposition to connectivity that disregards sovereignty and strategic sensitivity.

For Iran, the BRI offers investment, transport integration and a way to reduce Western isolation. Iran hopes to use Chinese cooperation to modernize transport, energy and industrial infrastructure. Yet Iran is also careful not to become excessively dependent on China. Iranian nationalism and strategic autonomy remain strong. Tehran welcomes Chinese partnership, but it does not wish to be reduced to a subordinate corridor in China's grand design. This tension makes China–Iran cooperation significant but not unlimited.

For India–Iran relations, the BRI has mixed implications. If China dominates Iranian infrastructure, India’s role in Chabahar may be weakened. If Iran uses China as one partner among many, India can still maintain space. The future depends on whether India can deliver projects, sustain diplomatic engagement and preserve trust with Iran. Chabahar and INSTC are India’s answer to the BRI’s westward reach. In strategic language, India must respond to the BRI through *selective counter-connectivity*, not rhetorical resistance alone.

In conclusion, China’s Belt and Road Initiative has made West Asia a major theatre of connectivity politics. It gives China economic reach, infrastructure influence and strategic options. For India, it creates concerns regarding Pakistan, the Indian Ocean, Iran and regional balance. In the refined language of geopolitics, the BRI is China’s *corridor-based projection of power across the Eurasian rimland*.

12.1.3 China’s Diplomatic Role in the Gulf

China’s diplomatic role in the Gulf has expanded significantly in recent years. Traditionally, China was viewed mainly as an energy buyer and trade partner. Today, it is increasingly seen as a diplomatic actor capable of engaging rival regional powers. The most striking example was China’s facilitation of the Saudi–Iran rapprochement in 2023. This event showed that China could use its economic relationships with both sides to encourage diplomatic de-escalation. It marked a shift from pure economic engagement to *selective diplomatic mediation*.

China’s advantage in Gulf diplomacy lies in its balanced relations with multiple actors. It maintains strong energy and trade ties with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Iraq. It also maintains a strategic relationship with Iran. Unlike the United States, China is not seen as a military protector of one camp against another. Unlike regional powers, it is not directly involved in sectarian or ideological competition. This gives China diplomatic room. It can speak to Iran and Saudi Arabia simultaneously.

China’s diplomatic style is cautious. Beijing prefers statements on sovereignty, non-interference, dialogue and development. It avoids taking direct responsibility for the security architecture of the Gulf. This distinguishes China from the United States, which has maintained military bases, naval deployments and defence partnerships in the region. China wants

influence without entanglement. Its Gulf diplomacy is therefore a form of *low-risk diplomatic activism*.

The Gulf states also welcome China's presence because it gives them strategic diversification. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf countries continue to value U.S. security ties, but they also want economic and diplomatic options. China offers markets, investment, technology and political recognition without demanding domestic political reforms. This makes China attractive. Gulf states use China to diversify their external partnerships and increase bargaining power with the West.

China's role in Gulf diplomacy also supports its energy interests. Stability between Saudi Arabia and Iran reduces risks to oil supplies, shipping and regional markets. China has no interest in a major Gulf war that could disrupt energy flows and damage the global economy. Therefore, Beijing's mediation is not purely altruistic; it is linked to energy security and trade stability. Peace in the Gulf protects Chinese interests.

For Iran, China's diplomatic role provides international legitimacy and a channel beyond Western-dominated diplomacy. Tehran values Beijing's support because China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a major economic power. China can help Iran avoid complete isolation. However, Iran also knows that China will not sacrifice its relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE or the United States entirely for Iran. Therefore, China is useful to Iran but not a full strategic protector.

For India, China's diplomatic rise in the Gulf has mixed implications. On one hand, de-escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia benefits India because India has strong ties with both. Regional stability protects energy flows, Indian diaspora and trade. On the other hand, China's success in mediation enhances Beijing's prestige and may reduce India's diplomatic visibility. India has historically maintained balanced relations in West Asia, but China's growing role means India must be more proactive.

India's response should not be alarmist. China's Gulf diplomacy still has limits. Beijing has not replaced the United States as a security provider. It avoids deep involvement in regional conflicts when risks are high. Its mediation works best when regional actors already wish to reduce tensions. Thus, China's role is important but not omnipotent. India should recognize both its significance and its limitations.

In conclusion, China's diplomatic role in the Gulf represents a new stage in its West Asia policy. Energy trade led China into the region; BRI deepened its infrastructure role; mediation expanded its diplomatic profile. In the elevated language of diplomacy, China is attempting to become a *commercial power with diplomatic utility* in the Gulf, without becoming a full security guarantor.

12.2 China–Iran Strategic Cooperation

China–Iran strategic cooperation has become one of the most consequential relationships in West Asian geopolitics. It is based on energy, trade, infrastructure, sanctions resistance, diplomatic support, multipolarity and shared suspicion of U.S. dominance. China needs energy and Eurasian routes; Iran needs markets, investment and international support. Their relationship is therefore shaped by *complementary vulnerabilities* and *strategic convenience*.

China and Iran established a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016 and later signed a 25-year cooperation agreement in 2021. These developments signalled that both countries wished to institutionalize long-term cooperation. The areas of cooperation include energy, infrastructure, trade, transport, banking, technology, culture, security dialogue and international coordination. However, the actual implementation has been uneven because of sanctions, financial risk, political uncertainty and China's caution.

The relationship is not an alliance in the strict military sense. China does not provide Iran with unconditional security guarantees. Iran does not subordinate its foreign policy to China. Instead, the relationship is a strategic partnership shaped by mutual need. Iran needs China more because of sanctions, but China also benefits from Iranian oil and regional influence. This creates asymmetry, but not complete dependence.

China–Iran cooperation also has an ideological dimension. Both countries criticize unilateral sanctions and Western pressure. Both speak the language of sovereignty, non-interference and multipolarity. Both participate in institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This shared discourse does not remove all differences, but it provides diplomatic vocabulary for cooperation. In international politics, vocabulary matters because it gives partnerships legitimacy.

For India, China–Iran cooperation is important because it can influence Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, INSTC and Iran’s strategic choices. India wants Iran as an independent partner, not as a space dominated by China. If China’s presence in Iran expands deeply into ports, railways, energy and digital infrastructure, India may face reduced space. Therefore, China–Iran cooperation is both a reality to be accepted and a challenge to be managed.

12.2.1 Economic Cooperation

Economic cooperation is the foundation of China–Iran strategic relations. China is one of Iran’s most important trading partners and a major buyer of Iranian oil. Iran, due to sanctions, has found it difficult to trade freely with many Western and Asian economies. China, with its vast market and willingness to maintain ties despite U.S. pressure, has become economically indispensable to Tehran. This gives Beijing significant leverage.

Iran exports oil, petrochemical products, minerals and other commodities to China. China exports machinery, electronics, industrial goods, transport equipment, consumer goods, technology and infrastructure services to Iran. This trade relationship is asymmetrical because China’s economy is vastly larger. Iran needs China for revenue and goods; China values Iran but has many other economic partners. This asymmetry creates both opportunity and discomfort for Iran.

Sanctions are central to this economic relationship. U.S. sanctions restrict Iran’s banking, oil exports, shipping, insurance and investment channels. China has found ways to continue some trade, but many major Chinese firms remain cautious because they do not want to lose access to Western markets and the dollar financial system. As a result, China–Iran economic cooperation often involves smaller firms, indirect payments, discounted oil, shadow shipping and complicated financial mechanisms. This is *sanctions-conditioned commerce*.

The 25-year cooperation agreement raised expectations in Iran that China would invest heavily in energy, transport, industry and technology. However, the implementation of such expectations has been slower than public rhetoric suggested. China is pragmatic. It signs long-term agreements, but it calculates risk carefully. It does not invest recklessly where sanctions, instability or

diplomatic cost are high. Therefore, China–Iran economic cooperation is substantial but not limitless.

For Iran, economic cooperation with China provides breathing space. It reduces isolation, generates revenue, supplies industrial goods and strengthens Tehran's bargaining position. For China, Iran offers discounted oil, a strategic location and political partnership against Western pressure. This mutual usefulness explains the durability of the relationship. Yet both sides also hedge. Iran does not want total dependence; China does not want excessive exposure.

Economic cooperation also includes technology. Chinese telecommunications, surveillance systems, digital platforms, industrial equipment and infrastructure technology may find space in Iran. This raises concerns for India and Western countries because digital infrastructure can create long-term strategic dependence. A country that controls data systems, telecom networks and smart infrastructure can gain influence beyond trade. Therefore, China–Iran economic cooperation has a *digital-strategic dimension*.

China's economic role in Iran may also affect Indian firms. If Chinese companies dominate Iranian infrastructure, ports, railways or industrial zones, Indian companies may find less room. Chabahar remains important because it provides India a distinct space in Iran. India must therefore sustain economic engagement with Iran rather than rely only on cultural goodwill. In geopolitics, presence must be material.

India should also understand that Iran uses China partly because India's economic engagement has been constrained by sanctions and external pressure. When India reduced oil imports from Iran after U.S. sanctions, Iran had to deepen dependence on other buyers, especially China. Thus, China's economic rise in Iran is partly a result of the vacuum created by sanctions and India's reduced energy trade. India must manage this reality with strategic realism.

In conclusion, China–Iran economic cooperation is a sanctions-shaped partnership of necessity and opportunity. It gives Iran markets and revenue; it gives China oil and influence. For India, this cooperation is significant because it may reduce India's economic space in Iran unless India strengthens Chabahar, INSTC, trade mechanisms and diplomatic engagement. In the

language of geoeconomics, China–Iran economic cooperation is the *commercial skeleton of a strategic partnership under Western pressure*.

12.2.2 Energy and Infrastructure

Energy and infrastructure are the two strongest pillars of China–Iran cooperation. Iran possesses vast oil and gas reserves, while China requires secure and diversified energy supplies. Iran also needs roads, railways, ports, industrial modernization, refinery upgrades, petrochemical investment and digital infrastructure. China has construction capacity, finance, technology and state-backed companies. This creates a natural partnership, though sanctions complicate implementation.

In energy, China benefits from Iranian oil. Sanctions often force Iran to sell at discounted rates and through complex channels. China, therefore, can secure supply under favourable conditions. Iran benefits because Chinese purchases provide revenue when many other buyers are restricted. This creates a relationship of *discounted interdependence*. It is not equal, but it is useful to both sides.

Natural gas also has long-term potential. Iran has some of the world's largest gas reserves, but sanctions, technology constraints and investment shortages limit full development. China has experience in pipelines, LNG infrastructure, energy finance and petrochemicals. In theory, China could help Iran develop gas resources. In practice, sanctions and market calculations limit the scale of cooperation. Still, energy remains the most important long-term foundation of the partnership.

Petrochemicals are also important. Iran seeks to move beyond crude oil exports and develop value-added petrochemical industries. China's demand for petrochemical inputs, plastics, fertilizers and industrial materials can support this ambition. Cooperation in refining, petrochemicals and industrial parks can deepen China's economic presence in Iran. This would make the relationship more sophisticated than simple crude-oil trade.

Infrastructure is the second pillar. China has shown interest in Iranian railways, roads, ports, metro systems, industrial zones and telecommunications. Iran's geography makes infrastructure particularly valuable because the country can connect China, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. If Chinese infrastructure

projects in Iran expand, Iran could become a major BRI corridor state. This would strengthen China's Eurasian reach.

Ports are especially sensitive. Iran's ports can connect China with the Gulf, Indian Ocean, Caspian region and Eurasian corridors. If China gains strong influence over Iranian port development, India's strategic space may narrow. Chabahar is therefore critical for India. It ensures that India has a direct operational role in Iran's maritime connectivity. Without Chabahar, China's infrastructure presence in Iran could become even more dominant.

Railways also matter. Iranian railway links toward Central Asia, the Caspian, Turkey and Afghanistan can support both BRI and INSTC. China may view these routes as part of its Eurasian connectivity network. India views them as part of access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia. Thus, the same Iranian infrastructure can serve multiple strategic visions. Iran benefits by balancing them, but India must ensure it is not excluded.

Infrastructure cooperation also includes urban systems, telecommunications and digital infrastructure. Chinese firms have global experience in metro construction, smart cities, surveillance systems and communications networks. Iran may welcome such cooperation because Western alternatives are restricted. However, digital infrastructure can create strategic dependence. For India, this raises concerns about intelligence, data control and long-term Chinese influence in Iran's institutions.

Energy and infrastructure cooperation between China and Iran also has military-strategic implications. Better ports, roads and railways can be dual-use. They may support trade, but in crises they can also support strategic mobility, logistics and influence. China's military presence in Iran is limited, but infrastructure can create future options. Strategic planners must therefore assess not only declared purposes but potential uses.

For India, the central concern is not that Iran cooperates with China; it is that China might dominate Iran's strategic infrastructure in ways that reduce India's access. India must therefore remain active in Chabahar, promote INSTC, revive trade, explore energy options when conditions permit, and maintain high-level political trust. Strategic spaces are not preserved by sentiment; they are preserved by investment and execution.

In conclusion, China–Iran energy and infrastructure cooperation is the material foundation of their strategic partnership. Energy gives China supply

and Iran revenue; infrastructure gives China influence and Iran development. For India, this cooperation is a warning that delay in Chabahar or weak economic engagement can create space for China. In elevated geopolitical language, China–Iran energy and infrastructure cooperation is the *steel-and-oil architecture of Beijing’s influence in Tehran*.

12.2.3 Strategic Implications for India

The strategic implications of China–Iran cooperation for India are profound. India has historically maintained close civilizational, cultural, energy and connectivity ties with Iran. Iran is essential for India’s access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and the INSTC. If China becomes too dominant in Iran’s economy, energy sector, infrastructure, ports, railways or digital systems, India’s strategic room may shrink. Therefore, China–Iran cooperation must be closely watched by Indian policymakers.

The first implication concerns Chabahar. Chabahar is India’s most important strategic project in Iran. It gives India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without depending on Pakistan. If Chinese influence over Iranian ports and transport infrastructure grows, India must ensure that Chabahar remains insulated from marginalization. Chabahar should not become a neglected side project while Chinese-funded corridors dominate Iran’s strategic planning. India must sustain investment, operations and political attention.

The second implication concerns Pakistan and CPEC. China is Pakistan’s strongest strategic partner, and CPEC links China with Gwadar. If China also deepens its role in Iran, India may face Chinese influence on both sides of Pakistan: Gwadar in Pakistan and potential infrastructure in Iran. This creates a complex strategic environment. India’s Chabahar engagement is therefore not only about Afghanistan; it is also about preventing strategic exclusion from the north-western Indian Ocean connectivity map.

The third implication concerns Afghanistan. India’s access to Afghanistan depends heavily on Iran because Pakistan blocks direct land access. If China becomes the leading external actor in Iran’s Afghan-related connectivity, India’s influence could weaken. China may seek to link Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia through BRI-related frameworks. India must therefore keep Chabahar and humanitarian-trade routes active. Presence in Afghanistan-related connectivity is essential for India’s long-term role.

The fourth implication concerns Central Asia. China already has major influence in Central Asia through trade, investment, pipelines and BRI corridors. India's Central Asia policy is constrained by geography. Iran offers India one of the few viable routes. If China's infrastructure position in Iran becomes dominant, India's Central Asian access may become indirectly affected by Chinese preferences. Hence, India must strengthen INSTC, Chabahar and India–Central Asia mechanisms.

The fifth implication concerns energy. India once imported significant oil from Iran, but sanctions reduced this trade. China's continued purchase of Iranian oil has increased Beijing's leverage over Tehran. If India remains absent from Iranian energy markets for too long, it may lose influence. When geopolitical conditions permit, India should explore ways to revive energy cooperation in a legally safe and commercially viable manner. Energy trade creates strategic familiarity.

The sixth implication concerns the Indian Ocean. China's maritime presence has expanded through ports, logistics facilities, commercial terminals, naval visits and anti-piracy deployments. Gwadar already worries India. If China's influence in Iranian ports grows, India must assess whether this creates future maritime risks. Even commercial ports can carry dual-use implications. India's maritime strategy must therefore integrate the China–Iran factor.

The seventh implication concerns diplomatic balancing. Iran will not abandon China for India, just as India will not abandon relations with the United States or Gulf states for Iran. India must accept Iran's multi-alignment. However, India must prevent Iran from becoming overly China-dependent. This requires consistent diplomacy, economic engagement, cultural exchange, academic cooperation, technology partnerships, port development and regional consultations. A relationship must be maintained through continuous investment of attention.

The eighth implication concerns strategic autonomy. India's foreign policy seeks to avoid dependence on any one bloc. Iran is an important partner in this project because it gives India access beyond Pakistan and contributes to multipolar diplomacy. If Iran becomes deeply locked into China's strategic orbit, India's autonomy in the region may be reduced. Therefore, preserving an independent India–Iran relationship is part of India's larger strategic autonomy.

The ninth implication concerns the narrative of connectivity. China presents BRI as global development. India must present Chabahar, INSTC and its connectivity projects as transparent, sovereignty-respecting, inclusive and sustainable. India's advantage is that it can offer partnership without territorial violation and without overwhelming smaller states with asymmetrical dependency. The challenge is execution. Slow implementation weakens India's narrative. India must therefore match principles with performance.

The tenth implication concerns trilateral and multilateral diplomacy. India should strengthen engagement with Iran through platforms involving Central Asia, Russia, Afghanistan-related mechanisms, SCO dialogues and regional connectivity forums. If India remains diplomatically present, China's influence will be balanced. If India disengages, China's role will expand by default. Geopolitical space does not remain empty; it is occupied by the most persistent actor.

In conclusion, China–Iran strategic cooperation creates both challenge and instruction for India. The challenge is that China's economic and infrastructural presence in Iran may reduce Indian space. The instruction is that India must act with seriousness, speed and diplomatic sophistication. Chabahar must be operationally strengthened; INSTC must be activated; Iran must be engaged beyond symbolism; and India must remain present in Afghanistan and Central Asia. In the refined language of grand strategy, China–Iran cooperation is a *strategic reminder that India's westward access must be protected through execution, not aspiration*.

Concluding Observation

The China factor has introduced a new layer of complexity into India–Iran geopolitics. China's rise in West Asia began with energy dependence, expanded through the Belt and Road Initiative, and acquired diplomatic visibility through Gulf mediation. China's cooperation with Iran rests on energy, infrastructure, sanctions resistance and multipolar diplomacy. For Iran, China is a major economic partner and strategic counterweight. For China, Iran is an energy supplier, corridor state and geopolitical partner against Western pressure.

For India, the implications are significant. China's deepening role in Iran could affect Chabahar, Afghanistan access, Central Asia policy, INSTC,

maritime security and India's strategic autonomy. Yet India should not view China–Iran relations with panic. Iran values China, but it also values India, Russia, Central Asia and regional balancing. India's task is to ensure that its partnership with Iran remains active, credible and materially useful. In the broader architecture of Asian geopolitics, the China factor makes India–Iran cooperation more necessary, not less. Iran is the *strategic theatre where India's westward connectivity and China's Eurasian ambition quietly intersect*.

12.3 China–Pakistan–Iran Triangle

The *China–Pakistan–Iran triangle* is one of the most delicate and consequential formations in contemporary Asian geopolitics. It is not a formal alliance, but a fluid strategic configuration shaped by geography, infrastructure, energy, sanctions, port diplomacy, Afghanistan, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and India's security concerns. China is a rising global power with vast economic and strategic ambitions; Pakistan is China's closest South Asian partner and India's principal regional adversary; Iran is a civilizational state, energy power and strategic corridor connecting West Asia, Central Asia, the Caspian region and the Indian Ocean. The interaction among these three states produces a *triangular pressure environment* for India–Iran relations.

The triangle is complex because each side of it has a different logic. China–Pakistan relations are based on deep strategic cooperation, military partnership, CPEC, India-balancing and long-term infrastructure integration. China–Iran relations are based on energy, sanctions resistance, infrastructure, multipolar diplomacy and Iran's *Look East* orientation. Iran–Pakistan relations are based on neighbourhood compulsion, border security, trade, religion, Balochistan, Afghanistan and energy possibilities. India is not formally inside this triangle, but it is deeply affected by it because China and Pakistan are India's major strategic challengers, while Iran is India's indispensable western corridor partner.

The triangle also has a maritime expression. Gwadar in Pakistan and Chabahar in Iran are located along the Arabian Sea–Gulf of Oman maritime arc. Gwadar is linked with China–Pakistan connectivity, while Chabahar is linked with India–Iran connectivity. If China strengthens Gwadar through Pakistan and also deepens economic and infrastructural influence in Iran,

India may face a more complex strategic environment on its western maritime flank. Therefore, India's Iran policy cannot be separated from the larger China–Pakistan–Iran matrix.

Afghanistan adds another layer to this triangle. Pakistan has historically sought influence in Afghanistan; China seeks stability, mineral access and regional-security assurance; Iran seeks border security, refugee management, water security and protection of its cultural-religious interests. India seeks an Afghanistan that is not dominated by Pakistan-backed extremist networks and that can remain connected with India through Iran. Thus, Afghanistan becomes a *testing ground* where China, Pakistan, Iran and India's interests intersect.

The triangle also interacts with Central Asia. China already possesses deep trade, infrastructure and energy ties with Central Asian republics through the Belt and Road Initiative. Pakistan wants to use CPEC and Gwadar to present itself as a gateway to Central Asia. Iran wants to use its geography and ports to serve as a corridor for Central Asian trade. India wants access to Central Asia through Iran and the INSTC because Pakistan blocks direct land access. Therefore, the China–Pakistan–Iran triangle influences India's Central Asian ambitions.

Iran's position in this triangle is especially important because Tehran does not want to become a subordinate partner of any single power. Iran values China because Beijing provides markets, political support and economic possibilities under sanctions. Iran values Pakistan because of the shared border and neighbourhood management. Iran values India because of Chabahar, civilizational affinity, trade, Central Asian access and strategic autonomy. Iran's diplomacy therefore seeks *multipolar equilibrium*. It welcomes China, manages Pakistan and preserves India.

For India, the principal strategic issue is not the existence of China–Iran or Iran–Pakistan relations; both are natural and inevitable. The real concern is whether China's deep economic presence in Pakistan and Iran can create a corridor environment that reduces India's space. If Chinese capital, technology, logistics and political influence dominate the regional corridor map, India may become marginalized in westward connectivity. Chabahar is India's answer to this risk. It gives India a durable place in Iran's port geography and Eurasian access strategy.

In the intellectual language of classical geopolitics, this triangle may be interpreted through *The Geographical Pivot of History* by Halford Mackinder, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* by Alfred Thayer Mahan, and *The Geography of the Peace* by Nicholas Spykman. Mackinder's continental imagination explains why Central Asia and Eurasian corridors matter; Mahan's maritime theory explains why ports like Gwadar and Chabahar matter; Spykman's rimland logic explains why Iran, Pakistan and the Arabian Sea littoral are strategically decisive. The China–Pakistan–Iran triangle is therefore a modern expression of old geopolitical principles.

In conclusion, the China–Pakistan–Iran triangle is an informal but powerful strategic configuration. It brings together China's global connectivity ambition, Pakistan's India-focused strategic posture and Iran's corridor-based regional diplomacy. For India, this triangle is both a challenge and a warning. It shows that India must remain present in Iran, active in Chabahar, serious in Central Asia and vigilant toward China–Pakistan corridor politics. In refined diplomatic language, the China–Pakistan–Iran triangle is the *strategic shadow under which India must protect its westward access and Eurasian relevance*.

12.3.1 China–Pakistan Economic Corridor

The *China–Pakistan Economic Corridor* is the most visible and strategically consequential component of the China–Pakistan partnership. It is presented by China and Pakistan as a framework of regional connectivity, infrastructure development, energy projects, industrial cooperation and economic transformation. In physical terms, it seeks to connect China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's transport network and Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea. In strategic terms, it represents China's most ambitious entry into South Asian corridor politics and Pakistan's most significant attempt to transform geography into economic and strategic leverage.

CPEC is important because it binds China and Pakistan through infrastructure. Roads, highways, energy projects, special economic zones, fibre-optic links, power plants and port development create long-term interdependence. Unlike ordinary trade, infrastructure produces *embedded influence*. Once a country's roads, ports, power systems and industrial zones are built through another country's finance and technology, strategic dependence may deepen. This is why CPEC is not merely an economic project; it is a *geo-economic architecture*.

For Pakistan, CPEC is projected as a transformative development project. Islamabad presents it as a means to address energy shortages, improve transport connectivity, develop Gwadar, attract investment, create jobs and integrate Pakistan with regional trade. Pakistan also views CPEC as a way to strengthen its strategic value to China and increase its bargaining position in South Asia. A Pakistan connected to China through CPEC becomes more important in Beijing's regional calculations.

For China, CPEC offers multiple advantages. It strengthens China's partnership with Pakistan, expands the Belt and Road Initiative, provides access to the Arabian Sea, increases Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region, and creates potential alternatives to traditional maritime routes. Although CPEC cannot easily replace sea lanes through the Malacca Strait, it can provide China with strategic options. In geopolitics, options matter even when they are not immediately dominant.

For India, CPEC is deeply problematic. The most serious concern is sovereignty. CPEC passes through territory that India regards as part of the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh under Pakistan's illegal occupation. Therefore, India views CPEC not as a neutral economic project, but as a project that violates Indian sovereignty and legitimizes Pakistan's occupation. This gives India's opposition to CPEC a legal and territorial foundation.

CPEC also has security implications. It strengthens China–Pakistan strategic cooperation, brings Chinese infrastructure and personnel closer to India's sensitive northern and western regions, and enhances Pakistan's strategic confidence. The possibility of dual-use infrastructure—commercial in peace but potentially strategic in crisis—cannot be ignored. Roads, ports, fibre-optic networks and logistics systems may have civilian purposes, but they can also support military mobility, intelligence and strategic coordination.

CPEC also affects Afghanistan and Central Asia. Pakistan has sought to extend CPEC's relevance toward Afghanistan and beyond. If Pakistan and China succeed in making CPEC a dominant regional corridor, India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia may face greater strategic competition. India's response is to strengthen Chabahar, INSTC and India–Central Asia mechanisms. Thus, CPEC has indirectly increased the strategic importance of India–Iran cooperation.

For Iran, CPEC presents both opportunity and caution. On the one hand, Iran may benefit from regional connectivity if CPEC links with neighbouring economies. On the other hand, China–Pakistan control over corridor politics may reduce Iran’s independent transit centrality. Iran therefore watches CPEC carefully while developing Chabahar and maintaining relations with India. Tehran does not want to be bypassed by China–Pakistan routes; it wants to remain a corridor state in its own right.

CPEC faces challenges too. Pakistan’s economic crises, security threats in Balochistan, local grievances, debt concerns, slow implementation, political instability and attacks on Chinese personnel have created complications. Infrastructure corridors require not only finance but also local acceptance, governance capacity and security. Without these, the corridor’s strategic symbolism may exceed its commercial reality.

In conclusion, CPEC is China and Pakistan’s flagship corridor project and a major factor in India’s regional strategy. It strengthens China–Pakistan ties, gives Pakistan corridor ambition and gives China a route toward the Arabian Sea. For India, it raises sovereignty, security and connectivity concerns. In elevated geopolitical language, CPEC is the *steel-and-asphalt embodiment of China–Pakistan strategic convergence*.

12.3.2 Gwadar Port

Gwadar Port is the maritime anchor of CPEC and the most visible symbol of China–Pakistan connectivity in the Arabian Sea. Located in Pakistan’s Balochistan province near the Gulf of Oman and not far from the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar occupies a strategically sensitive position. It lies close to major energy sea lanes and provides Pakistan with a deep-sea port beyond Karachi and Port Qasim. In Pakistan’s strategic imagination, Gwadar is a *maritime gateway to economic transformation*; in China’s strategic imagination, it is a potential node in the Maritime Silk Road.

Gwadar’s significance begins with geography. It faces the Arabian Sea, lies near the entrance to the Persian Gulf, and sits on the western edge of Pakistan’s coastline. Such a location makes it relevant to energy shipping, trade routes, naval calculations and regional connectivity. Ports located near energy chokepoints possess significance beyond their immediate commercial volume. Their strategic value lies in potential access, surveillance, logistics and influence.

For Pakistan, Gwadar promises economic development for Balochistan and integration with national and regional markets. The port is expected to support industrial zones, logistics, free-zone activity, fishing modernization, airport connectivity, roads and trade. Pakistan's leadership frequently presents Gwadar as a future engine of national prosperity. However, the distance between promise and reality remains significant. Cargo volumes, local employment, water supply, electricity, security and local political acceptance continue to test Gwadar's future.

For China, Gwadar is important because it expands Chinese influence into the Arabian Sea. China does not need Gwadar only for trade; it needs it for strategic optionality. Gwadar can support Chinese commercial shipping, logistics, infrastructure influence and long-term maritime presence. Even if Gwadar is not formally a Chinese naval base, its future dual-use possibilities are carefully studied by Indian strategists. In strategic analysis, infrastructure must be assessed not only by declared purpose but by possible use under changed circumstances.

Gwadar also affects China's energy-security imagination. Energy from the Gulf moves through the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian chokepoints toward China. Chinese planners have long worried about vulnerability along long sea routes, especially the Strait of Malacca. Gwadar does not solve this problem completely, because moving oil through mountains and pipelines to Xinjiang is costly and difficult. Yet it gives China another strategic point on the map. This is *geopolitical optionality*, not immediate replacement.

The port's location in Balochistan creates major challenges. Baloch insurgency, local resentment, attacks on Chinese personnel, protests, resource grievances and accusations of exclusion have complicated Gwadar's development. Local populations often demand water, electricity, jobs, fishing rights and political dignity before grand corridor promises. A port cannot become a successful hub if its local society feels excluded. Therefore, Gwadar's strategic future depends on *local legitimacy* as much as Chinese investment.

Gwadar also has implications for Iran's Chabahar. The two ports are located relatively close to each other, but they are embedded in different strategic frameworks. Gwadar is linked with China and Pakistan; Chabahar is linked with Iran and India. Gwadar seeks to connect Pakistan and China to the Arabian Sea; Chabahar seeks to connect India with Afghanistan and Central

Asia through Iran. This proximity turns the two ports into symbols of corridor competition.

For India, Gwadar raises concern because it strengthens the China–Pakistan axis near India’s western maritime environment. India’s navy and strategic planners must consider whether Chinese involvement at Gwadar could eventually support a broader Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. This concern is not paranoia; it is standard maritime prudence. Great powers assess the long-term implications of foreign-controlled ports near strategic sea lanes.

At the same time, Gwadar’s success is not guaranteed. It faces security problems, governance challenges, local discontent, limited hinterland development and uncertain commercial viability. Ports do not become powerful merely because they are strategically located. They require cargo, markets, security, hinterland links and political stability. Gwadar has potential, but potential is not the same as performance.

In conclusion, Gwadar Port is Pakistan’s most ambitious maritime project and China’s most important port-linked foothold in Pakistan. It gives CPEC its maritime face and gives China a strategic presence near the Gulf of Oman. For India, Gwadar is a major concern because it links China, Pakistan, Balochistan and the Arabian Sea in one strategic frame. In refined language, Gwadar is the *maritime spearhead of China–Pakistan corridor ambition*.

12.3.3 India’s Concerns

India’s concerns regarding the China–Pakistan–Iran triangle are multidimensional. They involve sovereignty, security, maritime strategy, connectivity, Afghanistan, Central Asia, China’s influence in Iran, and the possibility of strategic encirclement. India does not object to legitimate economic connectivity in principle. India objects to corridors that violate sovereignty, create strategic dependence, strengthen hostile alignments or exclude India from its natural neighbourhood. CPEC and Gwadar are therefore concerns not because they are roads and ports, but because of their political and strategic context.

The first concern is sovereignty. India’s objection to CPEC is rooted in the fact that the corridor passes through territory India regards as under Pakistan’s illegal occupation. This is not a minor diplomatic objection. Sovereignty is the foundation of international order. A corridor passing through disputed or illegally occupied territory without the consent of the

rightful claimant cannot be accepted as a normal development project. Therefore, India's rejection of CPEC has a legal and constitutional basis.

The second concern is the strengthening of China–Pakistan strategic cooperation. China and Pakistan already have a close defence and diplomatic partnership. CPEC deepens this partnership through infrastructure and long-term economic involvement. Roads, ports, energy plants and digital networks can create strategic interdependence. For India, this means that Pakistan's capabilities and confidence may be reinforced by Chinese resources. This alters the regional balance.

The third concern is Gwadar's possible dual-use character. Although Gwadar is officially presented as a commercial port, Indian strategists must consider whether Chinese access could develop military or intelligence implications in the future. China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean has grown gradually through anti-piracy deployments, port calls and logistics interests. Gwadar could become part of a larger Chinese maritime network. India cannot ignore such a possibility.

The fourth concern is Afghanistan. Pakistan has historically used Afghan geography and politics as part of its strategic depth thinking. If CPEC and Gwadar are extended toward Afghanistan, Pakistan and China may gain greater influence over Afghan trade and infrastructure. India's development role in Afghanistan could face greater pressure. Therefore, Chabahar becomes critical for India because it provides an alternative route to Afghanistan that does not depend on Pakistan.

The fifth concern is Central Asia. China already has deep economic and infrastructure influence in Central Asia through BRI, pipelines, roads and trade. India's Central Asia policy is constrained by geography. If China–Pakistan corridors and China–Iran cooperation both expand, India may face difficulty entering Central Asian markets and strategic dialogues. India must therefore build its own corridor strategy through Iran and INSTC.

The sixth concern is China's possible influence in Iran. India has invested diplomatic and strategic effort in Iran, especially through Chabahar. If China becomes Iran's overwhelmingly dominant economic partner, India's influence may decline. Tehran may still value India, but Chinese capital and trade could shape priorities. India's concern is not that Iran cooperates with

China; rather, it is that India should not be displaced from Iran's strategic geography.

The seventh concern is the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean balance. Gwadar, China's Djibouti base, Chinese port activities in the wider Indian Ocean, and China's naval modernization all contribute to Indian concern. India sees the Indian Ocean as central to its security and prosperity. A growing Chinese maritime footprint near India's western approaches requires a robust Indian response through naval capability, partnerships, port access and maritime domain awareness.

The eighth concern is narrative. China presents CPEC and BRI as development projects. India must counter not only the physical infrastructure but also the diplomatic narrative. India must emphasize sovereignty-respecting, transparent, inclusive and sustainable connectivity. Chabahar and INSTC must be projected as responsible alternatives. However, narrative alone is not enough. India must deliver projects effectively. Slow implementation weakens credibility.

The ninth concern is Pakistan's leverage. If Pakistan can present itself as a necessary gateway for China, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Arabian Sea, its regional bargaining power increases. India's strategy is to reduce Pakistan's gatekeeping power by building alternative corridors through Iran. This is why India's Iran policy has such deep strategic meaning.

In conclusion, India's concerns regarding the China–Pakistan–Iran triangle are not emotional but structural. CPEC raises sovereignty concerns; Gwadar raises maritime concerns; China–Iran cooperation raises access concerns; and Pakistan's role raises security concerns. In the refined language of statecraft, India's concern is that the China–Pakistan–Iran triangle may become a *corridor complex restricting India's westward strategic mobility*.

12.4 India's Response to China's Role in Iran

India's response to China's role in Iran must be strategic, patient, practical and multidimensional. India cannot prevent Iran from engaging China, nor should it attempt to do so in an unrealistic manner. Iran is a sovereign state facing sanctions, economic pressure and strategic isolation; China offers Iran markets, energy purchases, infrastructure and diplomatic support. Therefore,

India must accept China's presence as a reality. The real task is to ensure that India remains an indispensable partner for Iran despite China's influence.

India's response should rest on three pillars: strengthening Chabahar, expanding Central Asia policy, and maintaining continuous diplomatic engagement with Iran. These pillars are interconnected. Chabahar gives India physical access; Central Asia policy gives India strategic direction; diplomatic engagement gives India political trust. Without Chabahar, India lacks route power. Without Central Asia policy, India lacks regional purpose. Without diplomacy, India lacks continuity. Together, these three pillars form India's answer to China's role in Iran.

India's response must also be grounded in *strategic autonomy*. India has relations with the United States, Russia, Gulf states, Israel, Iran and Central Asian republics. It must not allow any one relationship to destroy the others. Similarly, India must understand Iran's own multi-alignment. Iran cooperates with China, Russia, Pakistan, India and regional actors according to its interests. Mature diplomacy requires accepting this complexity and building durable mutual stakes.

India's response must be operational rather than rhetorical. China's advantage lies in project execution, finance and infrastructure scale. India's advantage lies in trust, civilizational connection, sovereignty-conscious connectivity, democratic credibility, and goodwill in Afghanistan and Central Asia. To compete effectively, India must improve delivery. Chabahar must move beyond symbolism; INSTC must move beyond declarations; Central Asia policy must move beyond summits; and India–Iran trade must move beyond historical nostalgia.

12.4.1 Strengthening Chabahar

Strengthening Chabahar is the most direct and necessary Indian response to China's role in Iran and Pakistan. Chabahar gives India a strategic foothold in Iran's south-eastern coast and provides access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without passing through Pakistan. It is the practical instrument through which India counters the possibility of being excluded from the regional connectivity map dominated by China–Pakistan corridors. Chabahar is therefore India's *strategic counter-corridor*.

The strengthening of Chabahar must begin with operational efficiency. A port becomes geopolitically meaningful only when it handles cargo reliably. India

must ensure regular shipping services, efficient cargo handling, container facilities, warehousing, customs coordination, digital documentation, competitive tariffs and private-sector participation. Strategic symbolism cannot substitute for commercial reliability. Traders will use Chabahar only if it is predictable, affordable and secure.

India must also strengthen Chabahar's hinterland connectivity. The port must be linked effectively with Iranian roads, railways, Afghanistan routes and Central Asian corridors. Without hinterland connectivity, Chabahar remains a coastal asset with limited continental reach. The Chabahar–Zahedan route, links toward Zaranj, connections to Iran's rail network and integration with INSTC are all essential. Chabahar must become not merely a port but a *corridor ecosystem*.

Chabahar must also be linked more deeply with Afghanistan. Even under Taliban rule, humanitarian and commercial movement should continue where feasible. India can use Chabahar to send wheat, medicines, medical equipment and other humanitarian supplies. Afghan traders should be encouraged to use Chabahar for exports and imports. This will strengthen the port's legitimacy as a regional public good and reduce dependence on Pakistan-controlled routes.

India should also promote Chabahar among Central Asian republics. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan seek diversified access to sea routes. India should work through India–Central Asia dialogues, business councils, freight trials and customs arrangements to encourage Central Asian use of Chabahar. The more Central Asian states use the port, the less Chabahar appears as only an India–Iran bilateral project. It becomes a regional platform.

Chabahar's relationship with INSTC must be strengthened. INSTC connects India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe. If Chabahar becomes one of the southern nodes of INSTC, India gains wider Eurasian access. This will also balance China's BRI corridors. India's answer to China's infrastructure diplomacy is not isolation but alternative connectivity. Chabahar and INSTC together form India's *western access architecture*.

India must also manage sanctions risk. U.S. sanctions on Iran complicate banking, insurance, shipping and private investment. India must use diplomatic channels to explain Chabahar's humanitarian and regional-

stability value. It must also design legally cautious, transparent and compliant mechanisms wherever possible. Chabahar's survival requires legal prudence and diplomatic persuasion.

India should improve domestic connectivity to Chabahar as well. Indian ports on the western coast—such as Mumbai, Jawaharlal Nehru Port, Kandla and Mundra—can be integrated with Chabahar trade routes. Logistics companies, exporters, pharmaceutical firms, agricultural exporters and freight forwarders should be informed and incentivized. A corridor succeeds when businesses use it, not merely when governments praise it.

India must also project Chabahar positively. It should not be described only as an anti-Gwadar or anti-CPEC project. Its diplomatic strength lies in its constructive identity: Afghanistan's access, Central Asia's outlet, Iran's regional development, India's connectivity, humanitarian assistance and Eurasian trade. Chabahar should be framed as *inclusive, sovereignty-respecting and development-oriented connectivity*.

In conclusion, strengthening Chabahar is India's most practical response to China's role in Iran and Pakistan. It gives India a durable presence, supports Afghanistan, opens Central Asia and balances China–Pakistan corridor influence. In the elevated language of grand strategy, Chabahar is India's *maritime key to continental relevance in a China-shaped corridor age*.

12.4.2 Expanding Central Asia Policy

Expanding Central Asia policy is the second major response India must pursue in relation to China's role in Iran. Central Asia is the geographical space where China's BRI, Russia's historical influence, Iran's transit geography, Turkey's cultural outreach and India's strategic aspirations intersect. If India wants to remain a serious Eurasian actor, it must deepen its engagement with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Iran is essential to this expansion because it provides India with access.

Central Asia matters for India because of energy, uranium, minerals, fertilizers, trade, security, counter-terrorism, narcotics control, connectivity and civilizational memory. India's historical links with Central Asia through Buddhism, Sufism, Persianate culture, trade and scholarship provide soft-power foundations. However, soft power alone cannot compete with China's infrastructure and trade presence. India must convert goodwill into material

engagement. This requires routes, investment, business networks and institutional mechanisms.

China's influence in Central Asia is vast. Chinese roads, pipelines, railways, loans, markets and digital networks have made Beijing a major economic actor in the region. India cannot match China's scale everywhere, but it can offer selective, high-quality partnerships. Pharmaceuticals, information technology, education, healthcare, capacity building, agriculture, digital public infrastructure, space cooperation and defence training are areas where India has strengths. India must use these strengths through a focused Central Asia strategy.

Chabahar and INSTC are essential to this policy. Central Asian states need access to southern seas, and India needs access to Central Asian markets. Iran provides the corridor. Through Chabahar, Bandar Abbas, Iranian railways, the Caspian Sea and INSTC-related routes, India can connect with Central Asia. This gives India's Central Asia policy a geographical foundation. Without Iran, India's Central Asia policy remains partially trapped in diplomatic abstraction.

India should also deepen the India–Central Asia Dialogue, National Security Adviser-level meetings, business councils and working groups on Chabahar. These mechanisms provide institutional continuity. Central Asian states are cautious, multi-vector actors; they do not want to become dependent on one power. India should present itself as a reliable, non-threatening and sovereignty-respecting partner. This aligns with Central Asia's own desire for strategic diversification.

Afghanistan remains important in Central Asia policy. A stable Afghanistan can connect India, Iran and Central Asia. An unstable Afghanistan blocks routes and exports insecurity. India and Iran should coordinate where possible on humanitarian assistance, trade routes and security concerns. Central Asian states also share concerns about terrorism, extremism and narcotics from Afghanistan. This creates a regional basis for cooperation.

India must also use economic instruments. Trade fairs, banking channels, logistics agreements, freight trials, digital platforms, pharmaceutical distribution networks and educational partnerships can deepen engagement. Central Asia should not be treated only as a strategic region; it must become

a commercial region for India. Business communities must be connected to policy. Without trade, strategy remains incomplete.

Energy and minerals should remain part of the policy. Kazakhstan's uranium and oil, Turkmenistan's gas, Uzbekistan's resources and the region's critical minerals can support India's long-term needs. Pipeline projects may be difficult because of Afghanistan and Pakistan, but maritime-land routes through Iran can support broader resource engagement. India must think creatively about energy beyond pipelines, including swaps, investments, electricity, green energy and mineral partnerships.

India should also work with Russia and Iran where interests converge. Russia remains influential in Central Asia; Iran provides access; India brings market and developmental capacity. Such coordination can balance China without creating rigid blocs. India's approach should be *plural connectivity*, not exclusive rivalry. Central Asian states prefer flexibility, and India should respect that.

In conclusion, expanding Central Asia policy is essential for India's response to China's role in Iran and Eurasia. India must move from symbolic engagement to sustained corridor-based, economic and security cooperation. In refined geopolitical language, Central Asia is the *continental theatre where India's Chabahar strategy must mature into Eurasian presence*.

12.4.3 Maintaining Diplomatic Engagement With Iran

Maintaining diplomatic engagement with Iran is the third and most important long-term response to China's role in Iran. India cannot protect its interests in Iran through occasional attention. Iran is a proud civilizational state with strategic anxieties, sanctions burdens, energy resources, regional ambitions and multiple external partnerships. It must be engaged consistently, respectfully and at high political levels. Diplomatic continuity is essential because Iran's foreign policy environment is constantly shaped by sanctions, Gulf tensions, China, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and domestic politics.

India's diplomatic engagement with Iran should be based on *strategic realism*. India must recognize that Iran will continue to cooperate with China because China offers markets, oil purchases, infrastructure and political support. India should not demand exclusivity. Instead, India should offer reliability, historical trust, Chabahar partnership, cultural connection, Central

Asian access, educational cooperation and balanced regional diplomacy. Iran should see India as an independent pole, not as a secondary actor.

High-level visits, joint commissions, foreign-office consultations and working groups must remain active. India–Iran relations have often suffered from episodic attention, especially when sanctions or other priorities dominate Indian diplomacy. To avoid losing space to China, India must maintain regular engagement. In diplomacy, absence creates vacuum; vacuum invites other powers. India must therefore remain visibly present in Tehran.

Economic engagement must be revived and diversified. Sanctions complicate oil trade, banking and investment, but India and Iran can still cooperate in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, food products, tea, rice, medical equipment, education, information technology, cultural industries, logistics and small-scale trade. India should explore safe payment mechanisms, rupee trade possibilities where feasible, barter-like arrangements, and third-country facilitation within legal limits. Economic ties give diplomacy material weight.

Energy dialogue should not be abandoned. Even if sanctions prevent large-scale oil imports at present, India should maintain technical and diplomatic conversations with Iran's energy sector. When conditions change, India should be ready to revive energy cooperation. Iran has vast oil and gas resources; India has long-term energy needs. A relationship that ignores energy loses one of its natural foundations.

Cultural diplomacy should also be strengthened. India and Iran share civilizational links through Persian language, Sufism, literature, art, architecture, music, manuscripts, cuisine and historical memory. These links create trust that China cannot easily replicate. India should invest in Persian studies, academic exchanges, cultural festivals, manuscript projects, university cooperation and think-tank dialogue. Soft power cannot replace hard infrastructure, but it sustains goodwill during difficult times.

India must also coordinate with Iran on Afghanistan. Both countries are affected by Afghanistan's instability, though in different ways. India worries about terrorism and Pakistan-backed influence; Iran worries about refugees, borders, water and narcotics. Regular consultation on Afghanistan can

preserve strategic convergence. Chabahar's Afghan dimension should remain active through humanitarian and trade channels.

India should also respect Iran's desire for autonomy. Iranian strategic culture is deeply shaped by memories of foreign intervention, sanctions and sovereignty pressure. India's diplomacy must avoid appearing to lecture Iran or treat it only as an instrument against China or Pakistan. A successful India–Iran relationship must be based on respect for Iran's independent identity. This will make Tehran more willing to preserve Indian space even while engaging China.

India's engagement with Iran must also be balanced with its ties to the United States, Gulf states and Israel. This is difficult but not impossible. India has already shown capacity for multi-alignment. It can maintain strong Gulf partnerships while engaging Iran; it can work with the United States while preserving Chabahar; it can cooperate with Israel while respecting Iran's sensitivities. This requires diplomatic finesse. Strategic autonomy is not a slogan; it is the art of managing contradictions.

Think-tank, academic and media engagement should also be deepened. Misperceptions often damage India–Iran relations. Iranian analysts sometimes feel India is too cautious under U.S. pressure; Indian analysts sometimes fear Iran is drifting toward China. Regular intellectual dialogue can reduce suspicion and clarify interests. Books, conferences, policy papers, translation projects and educational exchanges can support a deeper strategic conversation.

In conclusion, maintaining diplomatic engagement with Iran is essential for India's response to China's role. India cannot outspend China everywhere, but it can outlast, out-trust and out-position China in specific areas if it remains consistent. Iran values partners who respect its sovereignty and deliver tangible cooperation. In the elevated language of diplomacy, India must ensure that Iran remains not a Chinese-dominated corridor, but a *plural strategic space where Indian presence remains respected, useful and indispensable*.

Concluding Observation

The China–Pakistan–Iran triangle has become a major factor in India–Iran geopolitics. CPEC strengthens China–Pakistan strategic convergence; Gwadar gives that convergence a maritime anchor; China–Iran cooperation

gives Beijing a foothold in Iran's energy, infrastructure and diplomatic landscape; and Iran–Pakistan geography forces Tehran to maintain neighbourhood balance. India's concerns arise from sovereignty, security, maritime strategy, Afghanistan, Central Asia and possible Chinese dominance in Iran's corridor space.

India's response must be careful but firm. It must strengthen Chabahar, expand Central Asia policy and maintain sustained diplomatic engagement with Iran. These are not separate policies but parts of one grand strategic design. Chabahar provides access; Central Asia provides direction; Iran provides the corridor; diplomacy provides trust. In the wider Asian order, India's westward strategy will succeed only if it combines *strategic patience*, *infrastructural execution*, *commercial seriousness* and *civilizational diplomacy*. The China factor does not reduce the importance of India–Iran cooperation; it makes that cooperation more urgent and more consequential.

Chapter 13:

India–Iran Relations and the United States

India–Iran relations cannot be fully understood without examining the role of the United States. The United States is one of the most powerful external forces shaping Iran's international environment, India's strategic choices, global sanctions regimes, energy markets, maritime security and technology partnerships. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, U.S.–Iran relations have been marked by hostility, sanctions, nuclear disputes, regional rivalry, military confrontation, diplomatic breakdown and occasional tactical negotiation. India, therefore, finds itself in a complicated diplomatic position: Iran is essential for India's energy security, Chabahar connectivity, Afghanistan access and Central Asian outreach; the United States is essential for India's defence modernization, technology partnership, Indo-Pacific strategy, trade, diaspora linkages and global strategic rise.

The central problem for India is not whether Iran or the United States is more important in abstract terms. Both matter, but in different ways. Iran is a *geographical necessity* for India's westward connectivity; the United States is a *strategic multiplier* for India's global power. Iran helps India overcome Pakistan's transit obstruction and reach Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia. The United States helps India strengthen defence capability, advanced technology, maritime cooperation, global diplomacy and balance against China. India's foreign policy must therefore operate in a field of *simultaneous indispensability*.

The India–Iran–United States triangle is also a test of India's *strategic autonomy*. India cannot surrender its Iran policy entirely to Washington's sanctions preferences, because Chabahar, Afghanistan and Central Asia are direct Indian interests. At the same time, India cannot ignore the United States, because India–U.S. relations have become one of the pillars of India's twenty-first-century foreign policy. India's task is to preserve Iran engagement without damaging U.S. partnership and to deepen U.S.

partnership without abandoning Iran's strategic utility. This is the art of *multi-aligned diplomacy*.

Classical geopolitical thought helps explain this dilemma. Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* underlines the value of maritime routes and naval access; Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History* emphasizes the importance of Eurasian interiors; Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace* draws attention to rimland regions where sea and land power meet. Iran lies in such a rimland position, while the United States remains the principal external naval and financial power affecting that rimland. India must therefore deal with both geography and power: Iran represents the route; the United States represents the global system through which finance, sanctions, technology and security are mediated.

13.1 U.S.–Iran Hostility and Its Impact on India

U.S.–Iran hostility has had a direct and recurring impact on India's Iran policy. Whenever Washington intensifies sanctions or military pressure on Tehran, India faces complications in oil imports, banking channels, shipping insurance, investment, Chabahar development and diplomatic balancing. India's relationship with Iran has rarely failed because of India–Iran hostility; it has more often been constrained by external pressure arising from U.S.–Iran confrontation. In this sense, U.S.–Iran hostility functions as a *third-party constraint* on India–Iran cooperation.

The impact on India has been most visible in energy. For many years, Iran was an important supplier of crude oil to India because Iranian crude suited Indian refineries, was geographically convenient and often offered favourable terms. However, U.S. sanctions, especially after the 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA and the end of oil-import waivers, forced India to sharply reduce and eventually halt formal Iranian oil imports. This changed India's energy basket and increased dependence on other suppliers. Thus, sanctions transformed an energy partnership into a diplomatic dilemma.

The impact has also been visible in banking and payments. Even when India wished to trade with Iran, financial channels became difficult because international banks feared U.S. secondary sanctions. Insurance, shipping, dollar transactions, letters of credit and correspondent banking became complicated. This is the power of *financial geopolitics*. A state may not

physically block a ship, but it can make the transaction around that ship risky, costly and legally uncertain.

Chabahar is another major area of impact. India views Chabahar as a strategic project for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, because Chabahar lies in Iran, it is inevitably affected by U.S. sanctions policy. At various moments, the United States recognized Chabahar's relevance for Afghanistan and granted exceptions, but later policy shifts created uncertainty. This shows that India's connectivity strategy can be affected by Washington's Iran policy even when the project serves humanitarian and regional-stability goals.

U.S.–Iran hostility also creates diplomatic pressure for India in international forums. India must vote, speak and negotiate carefully on Iran-related nuclear issues, sanctions, regional security and multilateral resolutions. A strongly anti-Iran posture could damage India's relations with Tehran; a posture seen as too sympathetic to Iran could create discomfort with Washington and its partners. India therefore often uses language emphasizing dialogue, diplomacy, peaceful settlement and respect for international obligations. This is *diplomatic equilibrium under pressure*.

The hostility also affects India's wider West Asia policy. India has strong relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and the United States. U.S.–Iran tensions often intersect with Gulf security, Israel–Iran confrontation, Strait of Hormuz risks and energy-price volatility. Any major U.S.–Iran conflict can threaten Indian diaspora populations in the Gulf, oil supplies, shipping routes and trade. Therefore, India's concern is not only bilateral; it is systemic.

In conclusion, U.S.–Iran hostility has repeatedly narrowed India's room for manoeuvre. It has disrupted energy imports, complicated financial channels, slowed Chabahar, and compelled India to practise careful diplomacy. Yet India has not abandoned Iran because Iran remains strategically important. In refined geopolitical language, U.S.–Iran hostility is the *external pressure field within which India must preserve its Iranian corridor of interest*.

13.1.1 Background of U.S.–Iran Tensions

The background of U.S.–Iran tensions lies in a long history of mistrust, intervention, revolution, hostage-taking, sanctions, nuclear disputes, regional rivalry and ideological hostility. The relationship between the United States

and Iran was not always hostile. Under the Shah, Iran was one of America's principal allies in West Asia. The United States supported Iran as a pillar of regional security, energy supply and anti-Soviet strategy. However, the 1979 Iranian Revolution destroyed this alliance and replaced it with deep mutual suspicion.

The 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran became the foundational trauma of U.S.–Iran hostility. American diplomats were held hostage for 444 days, and the crisis reshaped U.S. perceptions of Iran. For Washington, revolutionary Iran became a symbol of anti-American radicalism. For Tehran, the United States represented imperial interference, support for the Shah and hostility to Iranian sovereignty. The hostage crisis transformed political disagreement into psychological enmity.

After the revolution, the United States and Iran broke diplomatic relations. The Iran–Iraq War further complicated the environment. The United States tilted toward Iraq in various ways, while Iran saw itself as defending a revolutionary state against hostile regional and global forces. Later incidents, including U.S. naval confrontations with Iran in the Persian Gulf and the downing of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988, deepened Iranian mistrust. These events became part of Iran's strategic memory.

In the 1990s and 2000s, U.S. concerns focused increasingly on Iran's nuclear programme, missile development, support for Hezbollah and other regional groups, opposition to Israel, and influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and the Gulf. The United States viewed Iran as a destabilizing power; Iran viewed the United States as a hegemonic power seeking regime change or strategic containment. This mutual perception created a *security dilemma of hostility*.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action temporarily created diplomatic hope. Under the JCPOA, Iran accepted restrictions on its nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief. For India, this period was positive because it opened possibilities for reviving energy trade and expanding Chabahar cooperation. However, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 under President Donald Trump and the reimposition of sanctions destroyed this diplomatic opening. Iran gradually reduced compliance, and tensions again escalated.

The killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani by a U.S. strike in January 2020 marked another major escalation. Iran retaliated against U.S. bases in Iraq, and the risk of war increased. Later regional crises involving Israel, the Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and maritime security continued to keep U.S.–Iran tensions alive. Even when direct talks occur, the relationship remains burdened by decades of suspicion.

The background of U.S.–Iran tensions therefore cannot be reduced to one issue. It includes history, ideology, nuclear policy, sanctions, regional power struggle, Israel, Gulf security, missiles, proxy networks and domestic politics in both countries. Each crisis revives older grievances. This makes the relationship structurally difficult to normalize.

For India, this background matters because India's Iran policy operates inside this hostile environment. India may have no desire to participate in U.S.–Iran confrontation, but it cannot avoid its consequences. Sanctions, maritime risk, energy uncertainty and diplomatic pressure all arise from the unresolved antagonism between Washington and Tehran. In conclusion, U.S.–Iran tensions are a *long historical fracture whose shockwaves repeatedly reach India's foreign policy*.

13.1.2 Sanctions Policy

Sanctions policy has been the most important instrument of U.S. pressure on Iran. The United States has used sanctions to target Iran's oil exports, banking system, shipping, insurance, petrochemicals, metals, defence sector, missile programme, Revolutionary Guard networks, technology procurement and foreign companies dealing with Iranian entities. These sanctions are not merely legal measures; they are instruments of *economic coercion* and *financial statecraft*.

The most powerful feature of U.S. sanctions is their extraterritorial effect. U.S. sanctions do not only affect American companies; secondary sanctions threaten non-U.S. companies and banks that engage with targeted Iranian sectors. Because the U.S. dollar, American financial markets and U.S.-linked banking networks are central to global commerce, many international actors avoid Iran even when their own governments may not fully agree with U.S. policy. This is the power of *dollar-centred sanctions hegemony*.

For India, sanctions policy has had direct consequences. India reduced Iranian oil imports because refiners, insurers, banks and shipping companies

feared exposure to U.S. penalties. Payment mechanisms became complicated. Indian companies became cautious about investment in Iranian infrastructure. Even when the Indian government valued relations with Iran, private and public-sector entities had to consider compliance risks. Thus, sanctions moved from international law into corporate decision-making.

Sanctions also weakened the Iran–India energy partnership. Iran had been a convenient oil supplier for India, but after the reimposition of U.S. sanctions, India was compelled to diversify toward suppliers such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, Russia and others. This showed that energy security is not only about availability of oil; it is also about legal access, payment channels and diplomatic risk.

Chabahar became a special case in sanctions policy. The United States at times accepted that Chabahar could help Afghanistan’s reconstruction and regional connectivity. This led to limited exceptions or waivers. However, such exceptions remained vulnerable to changes in U.S. policy. For India, this produced uncertainty. A long-term port project requires stable rules, but sanctions policy can change with administrations, regional crises or nuclear negotiations. This uncertainty is one of India’s greatest difficulties.

Sanctions also shaped Iran’s external orientation. As Western and many Asian companies withdrew from Iran, Tehran moved closer to China and Russia. Thus, U.S. sanctions sometimes produced unintended effects: they reduced India’s economic space in Iran while increasing China’s influence. This is a significant point for Indian strategy. When India cannot trade with Iran due to sanctions, other actors willing to bear risk may gain space.

Sanctions policy also affects humanitarian trade. Food and medicine may be formally exempt, but banking and shipping restrictions often create practical obstacles. This creates humanitarian pressure inside Iran and complicates third-country trade. India, with its pharmaceutical capacity and civilizational goodwill, could have served Iran more effectively in humanitarian sectors, but financial restrictions often limit such possibilities.

In conclusion, U.S. sanctions policy is the strongest external constraint on India–Iran cooperation. It affects oil, banking, shipping, insurance, Chabahar and private-sector confidence. In elevated diplomatic language, sanctions are the *invisible blockade through which financial power restricts geographical possibility*.

13.1.3 India's Diplomatic Compulsions

India's diplomatic compulsions arise from the need to protect its relations with both Iran and the United States. India cannot ignore Iran because Iran is central to Chabahar, Afghanistan access, Central Asia policy, INSTC, energy security and West Asian balance. India cannot ignore the United States because the U.S. partnership has become crucial for defence, technology, trade, Indo-Pacific strategy, diaspora interests and global influence. India therefore faces a complex *dual-compulsion diplomacy*.

The first compulsion is strategic. India needs the United States as a partner in balancing China, modernizing defence capabilities, accessing advanced technologies and strengthening maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, India needs Iran to bypass Pakistan and access Afghanistan and Central Asia. These are different theatres but both are vital. India must therefore avoid policies that make one theatre damage the other.

The second compulsion is energy. India is one of the world's largest energy importers. Iranian oil once contributed to India's energy diversification. U.S. sanctions reduced this option, compelling India to adjust its import basket. India must therefore balance legal compliance with long-term energy flexibility. Energy diplomacy requires India to preserve relations with Iran even when imports are restricted, because geopolitical conditions can change.

The third compulsion is connectivity. Chabahar is not an ordinary port project; it is India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. If India abandons Chabahar under pressure, it weakens its own continental strategy. Yet if India ignores U.S. sanctions entirely, it risks penalties and damage to India-U.S. relations. Therefore, India must negotiate, explain and preserve Chabahar through diplomatic engagement.

The fourth compulsion is West Asian balance. India has strong relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel and the United States. These relationships do not always align with each other. India must protect its citizens, energy flows, remittances and trade across the Gulf. A rigid ideological position would harm Indian interests. India's diplomacy must therefore remain flexible, issue-based and interest-driven.

The fifth compulsion is domestic and civilizational. India has historical links with Iran through Persian language, culture, Sufism, art, architecture, trade and intellectual exchange. Iran is not seen in India only through contemporary

sanctions; it is also part of India's civilizational memory. At the same time, the Indian diaspora and educational community in the United States have created deep social bridges. India's diplomacy must reflect both civilizational Iran and modern America.

The sixth compulsion is international reputation. India seeks to be seen as a responsible power that respects international law, supports diplomacy and avoids reckless confrontation. It cannot appear as a sanctions violator, but neither can it appear as a country whose regional connectivity is dictated entirely by another power. India must therefore frame its Iran policy around legitimate interests: humanitarian access, regional stability, energy security and connectivity.

In conclusion, India's diplomatic compulsions are real and unavoidable. They require subtlety rather than slogans. India must neither abandon Iran under American pressure nor damage its U.S. partnership for symbolic defiance. In the refined language of diplomacy, India's task is to conduct *strategic balancing without strategic surrender*.

13.2 India–U.S. Strategic Partnership

The India–U.S. strategic partnership has become one of the most important pillars of India's contemporary foreign policy. From the Cold War distance between New Delhi and Washington, the relationship has moved toward defence cooperation, technology partnership, trade expansion, diaspora strength, education, space cooperation, clean energy, cyber security, counter-terrorism and Indo-Pacific coordination. This transformation has occurred because both countries increasingly recognize convergence in the Asian balance of power, especially in relation to China.

India–U.S. relations are not an alliance in the formal treaty sense. India has not become a subordinate security partner of the United States. Rather, the relationship is a *strategic partnership between two autonomous democracies*. India maintains relations with Russia, Iran, Gulf states and other partners even while deepening U.S. ties. The United States, too, maintains its global alliance system and own priorities. The partnership is therefore based on convergence, not complete identity.

The growth of India–U.S. relations has created new diplomatic conditions for India's Iran policy. As the U.S. partnership becomes more important, India

must handle Iran more carefully. India cannot ignore U.S. sanctions or congressional opinion. Yet India also uses its improved relationship with Washington to argue for India-specific interests, including Chabahar's importance for Afghanistan and Central Asia. Thus, India–U.S. partnership is not only a constraint; it can also be a platform for negotiation.

13.2.1 Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation is one of the strongest pillars of India–U.S. strategic partnership. It includes military exercises, defence trade, logistics agreements, intelligence sharing, maritime cooperation, defence industrial collaboration, technology initiatives and institutional dialogues. India's armed forces have increasingly acquired U.S.-origin platforms and participated in joint exercises that improve interoperability. This has changed the character of India–U.S. relations from political engagement to operational cooperation.

The defence partnership developed gradually. India and the United States signed defence framework agreements, expanded military exercises such as Malabar, Yudh Abhyas and Vajra Prahar, and concluded foundational agreements such as LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA. These agreements improved logistics support, secure communications and geospatial cooperation. The defence relationship therefore acquired institutional depth.

For India, defence cooperation with the United States supports modernization and strategic deterrence. U.S. platforms such as P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, C-17 transport aircraft, C-130J, Apache helicopters, Chinook helicopters and other systems have strengthened Indian capabilities. The MQ-9B arrangement and defence-industrial roadmap further indicate the move toward advanced cooperation. These developments matter especially because of China's rise and increasing maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific.

For the United States, India is a major partner in maintaining a favourable balance in Asia. Washington sees India as an important actor in the Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific, technology supply chains and democratic strategic networks. India's size, geography, military capability and economic potential make it indispensable. Therefore, U.S. defence cooperation with India is not charity; it is strategic calculation.

This defence partnership affects India–Iran relations because Iran is viewed by the United States as a security threat, while India views Iran as a regional

partner. India must therefore ensure that defence cooperation with Washington does not eliminate India's ability to engage Tehran. At the same time, India must reassure Washington that its Iran engagement serves connectivity and regional stability, not anti-American strategy. This is a delicate balance.

India's defence cooperation with the United States also intersects with the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. sees China as the primary strategic competitor; India has its own border and maritime concerns regarding China. This convergence strengthens India–U.S. defence ties. Yet India's western strategy requires Iran. Thus, India's defence partnership with the United States and connectivity partnership with Iran serve different but complementary Indian goals.

In conclusion, India–U.S. defence cooperation is a major strategic asset for India. It strengthens capability, deterrence and Indo-Pacific posture. However, India must preserve autonomy so that defence cooperation does not become diplomatic dependence. In elevated language, India–U.S. defence cooperation is a *capability multiplier that must coexist with India's independent westward diplomacy*.

13.2.2 Technology and Trade

Technology and trade have become major pillars of India–U.S. relations. The United States is one of India's largest trading partners, a major source of investment, a centre of advanced research, and home to a large Indian diaspora. The relationship covers information technology, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, space, critical minerals, clean energy, pharmaceuticals, education, digital economy, cyber security and innovation. This makes the partnership more than diplomatic; it is *structural economic interdependence*.

Technology cooperation has gained special importance through initiatives such as iCET and later expanded strategic-technology frameworks. India seeks access to critical and emerging technologies that can support defence modernization, digital infrastructure, semiconductor manufacturing, space capability, quantum research, artificial intelligence and resilient supply chains. The United States sees India as a trusted technology partner and a possible alternative manufacturing and innovation hub in a world concerned about excessive dependence on China.

Trade ties are equally important. India exports services, pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, textiles, gems, IT services and professional expertise to the United States. The United States exports energy, aircraft, technology, machinery, services and defence equipment to India. This economic relationship creates constituencies in both countries that support stable relations. Trade gives diplomacy durability because businesses, universities, workers and consumers become stakeholders.

The Indian diaspora in the United States is a powerful bridge. Indian Americans occupy major positions in technology, academia, business, medicine, public policy and politics. They strengthen people-to-people relations and support India's image in American society. This diaspora dimension gives the India–U.S. partnership a social depth that India–Iran relations, though civilizationally rich, cannot match in the same modern institutional form.

Technology cooperation also affects India's global position. If India gains access to advanced technologies, it can strengthen manufacturing, defence production, digital sovereignty and innovation capacity. This is essential in the age of artificial intelligence, cyber competition, space militarization and semiconductor geopolitics. Therefore, India cannot afford to weaken U.S. technology partnership.

However, technology and trade ties also increase India's sensitivity to U.S. sanctions regimes. Indian companies integrated with U.S. markets cannot easily ignore U.S. restrictions on Iran. Banks, technology firms and exporters fear compliance risks. Therefore, the deeper India–U.S. economic partnership becomes, the more careful India must be in Iran-related transactions. This is the economic side of India's diplomatic dilemma.

India must therefore separate sectors. It can deepen technology and trade with the United States while maintaining permitted and strategically necessary cooperation with Iran. It can use legal compliance, humanitarian exemptions, non-dollar mechanisms where lawful, and diplomatic negotiation to preserve Iran-related interests. The task is not easy, but it is necessary.

In conclusion, India–U.S. technology and trade ties are indispensable for India's rise. They provide markets, innovation, investment and strategic capacity. Yet they also make sanctions compliance more important. In refined diplomatic vocabulary, India–U.S. technology and trade cooperation is the

economic-technological pillar of India's global ascent, requiring careful insulation from the Iran sanctions dilemma.

13.2.3 Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Indo-Pacific strategy is one of the most important areas of India–U.S. convergence. The Indo-Pacific links the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean into a single strategic theatre shaped by maritime routes, trade flows, naval competition, island states, chokepoints, China's rise and regional institutions. For India, the Indo-Pacific begins in the Indian Ocean, where India has major security responsibilities. For the United States, the Indo-Pacific is central to maintaining regional balance against China.

India and the United States share concerns regarding freedom of navigation, maritime security, resilient supply chains, rules-based order, infrastructure standards and coercive behaviour. The Quad, involving India, the United States, Japan and Australia, reflects this convergence. India does not see the Quad as a military alliance, but it is an important diplomatic and strategic platform. It strengthens India's Indo-Pacific profile.

The Indo-Pacific strategy affects India–Iran relations indirectly. Iran is not an Indo-Pacific partner in the usual sense, but Iran lies at the western edge of India's maritime and continental interests. India's Indo-Pacific policy cannot ignore the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf and West Asia. Energy flows from the Gulf pass through the Indian Ocean. Chabahar is located near this maritime space. Therefore, India's Indo-Pacific and Iran policies are geographically connected.

For the United States, Iran is often viewed through the lens of Middle East security and sanctions. For India, Iran is also viewed through the lens of connectivity and westward access. This difference creates policy tension. Washington may prioritize pressure on Iran; New Delhi prioritizes access through Iran. The Indo-Pacific partnership with the United States therefore must be managed alongside India's Iran route.

China is the connecting factor. India–U.S. Indo-Pacific cooperation is partly driven by China's rise. India's Iran engagement is partly necessary because China–Pakistan connectivity through Gwadar and CPEC threatens to marginalize India in the west. Thus, both India–U.S. cooperation and India–Iran cooperation are responses to different dimensions of China's rise. This

is a sophisticated strategic reality: India needs the United States in the maritime east and Iran in the continental west.

India must avoid allowing the Indo-Pacific to become an argument for abandoning Iran. A power with continental and maritime ambitions cannot choose only one flank. India's eastern maritime strategy and western connectivity strategy must move together. The Indo-Pacific gives India strategic reach in the oceanic domain; Iran gives India access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia.

In conclusion, Indo-Pacific strategy strengthens India–U.S. convergence but does not remove Iran's importance. India's challenge is to ensure that Indo-Pacific partnership with Washington and Chabahar partnership with Tehran are seen as complementary components of India's wider strategic autonomy. In elevated language, the Indo-Pacific is India's *maritime theatre of balance*, while Iran is India's *western corridor of access*.

13.3 India's Balancing Between Iran and the United States

India's balancing between Iran and the United States is one of the finest tests of Indian diplomacy. It requires India to protect its strategic partnership with Washington while preserving its civilizational and connectivity partnership with Tehran. This balancing is neither opportunistic nor confused; it is a rational response to India's geography, energy needs, security challenges and global ambitions. India is too large to behave as a camp follower and too interdependent to behave as an isolated power. Its policy must therefore be *autonomous but engaged*.

India's balancing differs from neutrality. Neutrality suggests distance from both sides. India is not distant from either. It has close relations with the United States and meaningful relations with Iran. The more accurate term is *multi-alignment*. India aligns with different partners on different issues while preserving decision-making independence. With the United States, India cooperates on defence, technology and Indo-Pacific balance. With Iran, India cooperates on Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, culture and potential energy. Both relationships serve Indian interests.

This balancing is difficult because U.S.–Iran hostility is intense. Washington often demands compliance with sanctions; Tehran expects friendly states to resist U.S. pressure. India must avoid alienating either side beyond repair.

This requires careful language, issue-specific diplomacy, legal caution and strategic patience. India's policy toward Iran and the United States is therefore a continuous exercise in *diplomatic triangulation*.

13.3.1 Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy is the foundation of India's balancing between Iran and the United States. It means the ability to take foreign-policy decisions based on national interest rather than external pressure. It does not mean isolation, anti-Americanism or anti-Western posture. It means that India cooperates with powerful states without surrendering its independent judgement. In the context of Iran and the United States, strategic autonomy allows India to engage Washington deeply while preserving essential ties with Tehran.

Strategic autonomy has deep roots in Indian foreign policy. During the Cold War, it appeared as non-alignment. In the contemporary era, it appears as multi-alignment. India no longer remains equidistant from all powers; rather, it engages multiple powers simultaneously. It works with the United States, Russia, Iran, Japan, France, Gulf states, Israel, ASEAN and Central Asia according to issue-based interests. This is *pragmatic pluralism*.

In Iran policy, strategic autonomy means that India recognizes Iran's importance despite U.S. sanctions. India does not accept that its access to Afghanistan and Central Asia should be determined entirely by Washington's confrontation with Tehran. Chabahar is an example of strategic autonomy in practice. India argues that the project supports regional connectivity and humanitarian access, not sanctions evasion.

In U.S. policy, strategic autonomy means that India deepens defence, technology and trade cooperation without becoming a treaty ally. India retains the right to buy Russian equipment, engage Iran, maintain Gulf relations and take independent positions in multilateral forums. The United States may prefer greater alignment, but India's value to Washington partly lies in India's independent weight. A dependent India would be less valuable as a strategic partner.

Strategic autonomy also requires capacity. A state cannot be autonomous merely through rhetoric; it needs military strength, economic resilience, technological capability, energy diversification and diplomatic skill. India's partnerships with both Iran and the United States contribute to different

dimensions of this capacity. The United States strengthens technology and defence; Iran strengthens westward access and corridor autonomy.

However, strategic autonomy is not cost-free. India must manage criticism from both sides. The United States may question India's Iran engagement; Iran may question India's compliance with sanctions. India must explain that its decisions are based on national interest, regional stability and responsible diplomacy. Autonomy requires the courage to bear diplomatic pressure.

In conclusion, strategic autonomy is the conceptual core of India's Iran–U.S. balancing. It allows India to avoid binary choices and preserve independent partnerships. In refined diplomatic language, strategic autonomy is India's *sovereign capacity to engage competing powers without becoming captive to either*.

13.3.2 Energy and Sanctions Dilemma

The energy and sanctions dilemma is one of the most practical difficulties in India's relations with Iran and the United States. India needs large, reliable and diversified energy supplies. Iran has historically been a useful supplier because of proximity, crude quality, payment flexibility and long-standing relations. However, U.S. sanctions have made Iranian oil imports legally and financially risky. This creates a dilemma between *energy rationality* and *sanctions compliance*.

Before the intensified sanctions environment, Iranian oil formed an important part of India's import basket. Indian refiners valued Iranian crude, and Iran often offered favourable commercial terms. Energy trade also gave India influence in Tehran. Oil creates regular interaction among companies, banks, shipping firms and governments. When oil trade declines, the broader relationship loses one of its material foundations.

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the reimposition of sanctions changed this equation. India had to reduce imports to protect its companies and banks from U.S. penalties. This demonstrated the reach of secondary sanctions. Even when India did not wish to abandon Iranian oil, financial and legal risks compelled adjustment. The dilemma was not simply political; it was operational.

India responded by diversifying energy sources. It increased imports from other suppliers and adjusted refinery choices. Later, India's energy basket

also changed due to global events, including Russia-related market shifts and wider oil-market disruptions. This diversification reduced immediate vulnerability but did not eliminate the strategic value of Iran. A prudent energy policy keeps options alive for future conditions.

The sanctions dilemma also affects natural gas. Iran possesses enormous gas reserves, and projects such as the Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline once carried strategic imagination. However, security, pricing, Pakistan transit, sanctions and geopolitics prevented realization. For India, Iranian gas remains attractive in theory but difficult in practice. Energy geography is favourable; political geography is not.

The dilemma also affects investment. Indian companies cannot easily invest in Iranian upstream fields, refineries, petrochemicals or infrastructure if sanctions exposure is high. This gives space to China and other risk-tolerant actors. Therefore, sanctions not only stop trade; they reshape influence. India's reduced energy presence in Iran may increase Iran's dependence on China. This has strategic implications.

India must manage this dilemma through flexibility. It should maintain dialogue with Iran's energy sector, monitor sanctions changes, protect legal compliance, diversify suppliers, expand strategic reserves, develop renewable energy, and remain ready to revive Iranian energy cooperation if conditions permit. A door kept ajar is better than a door permanently closed.

Energy diplomacy must also include the United States. India should explain its energy-security needs and seek understanding when Iranian energy becomes important. The United States increasingly recognizes India's importance, but Washington's Iran policy may still be rigid. India must negotiate from the standpoint of a major energy consumer, not a subordinate requester.

In conclusion, the energy and sanctions dilemma is a central challenge in India's Iran policy. Iran offers energy logic; U.S. sanctions impose legal constraint. India must balance both by preserving options, diversifying supplies and maintaining diplomatic communication. In elevated language, India's energy dilemma with Iran is the *collision between hydrocarbon geography and financial geopolitics*.

13.3.3 Chabahar Exception and Diplomatic Negotiation

The Chabahar exception and diplomatic negotiation represent one of India's most important achievements and challenges in balancing Iran and the United States. Chabahar is vital for India because it provides access to Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan. It is located in Iran, but its purpose is not to strengthen Iran against the United States; its purpose is to support regional connectivity, humanitarian movement and trade diversification. India has repeatedly emphasized this distinction.

The United States at times accepted the special nature of Chabahar because the port supported Afghanistan's reconstruction and gave landlocked Afghanistan an alternative route. This led to sanctions exceptions or waivers for Chabahar-related activity. For India, such exceptions were diplomatically valuable because they allowed continuation of the project despite wider sanctions on Iran. This showed that diplomatic negotiation could create limited space even within hostile U.S.–Iran relations.

However, Chabahar exceptions have never been permanently secure. They depend on U.S. political decisions, interpretations of sanctions law, Afghanistan policy, Iran tensions and congressional mood. When the United States shifted policy or revoked exceptions, India's project faced uncertainty. This demonstrates the fragility of exception-based diplomacy. A strategic project cannot flourish if its legality is repeatedly questioned.

India's diplomatic argument on Chabahar rests on several foundations. First, Chabahar supports Afghanistan's access and humanitarian needs. Second, it reduces Pakistan's transit monopoly, which has often hurt Afghan trade. Third, it supports Central Asian connectivity and regional development. Fourth, it provides India a lawful commercial route rather than a military platform. Fifth, it contributes to broader Eurasian connectivity through links with INSTC. These arguments give Chabahar a positive diplomatic identity.

India must continue negotiating with Washington to preserve Chabahar. Such negotiation should not be apologetic; it should be strategic and reasoned. India should explain that Chabahar contributes to stability in a region where instability can strengthen extremism, narcotics and humanitarian collapse. The port helps the Afghan people, supports Central Asian trade and gives Iran an incentive for constructive regional engagement. Therefore, Chabahar should be treated as a *regional public good*.

India must also negotiate with Iran. Tehran expects India to implement commitments despite sanctions. Iranian patience can weaken if India delays projects due to external pressure. India must therefore maintain transparent communication with Iran, explaining legal limitations while showing practical commitment. The 2024 long-term contract for Shahid Beheshti Terminal was important because it signalled continuity. India must now translate continuity into cargo, infrastructure and commercial confidence.

Chabahar diplomacy also requires private-sector assurance. Companies will not invest or use routes if they fear sanctions. India must create clear legal guidance, insurance mechanisms, banking options and government-backed confidence. The port cannot rely only on public-sector symbolism. It needs commercial life. Diplomacy must therefore become logistics.

Chabahar also has strategic significance in relation to China and Pakistan. Gwadar under China–Pakistan connectivity gives Beijing and Islamabad a major maritime symbol. Chabahar gives India a constructive alternative. If Chabahar weakens, India’s westward access weakens. Therefore, negotiations with the United States over Chabahar are not minor technical conversations; they are matters of grand strategy.

In conclusion, the Chabahar exception is a critical example of India’s diplomatic balancing between Iran and the United States. It shows that India can protect national interests through negotiation, legal caution and strategic argument. Yet it also shows the vulnerability of India’s Iran policy to U.S. sanctions. In refined language, Chabahar is the *test case of India’s ability to preserve strategic autonomy within the architecture of American sanctions power*.

Concluding Observation

India–Iran relations and the United States form a complex triangular field. U.S.–Iran hostility constrains India’s energy trade, banking, investment and Chabahar strategy. India–U.S. strategic partnership strengthens India’s defence, technology, trade and Indo-Pacific posture. India’s challenge is to balance these two realities without sacrificing either. Iran gives India westward access; the United States gives India global strategic capacity.

The correct Indian approach is neither defiance nor submission. It is *strategic autonomy through calibrated engagement*. India must deepen India–U.S. defence and technology cooperation, preserve India–Iran connectivity,

negotiate Chabahar exceptions, keep energy options alive and maintain diplomatic credibility with both Tehran and Washington. In the broader architecture of India's foreign policy, Iran and the United States are not interchangeable partners; they are different instruments of India's rise. India's diplomacy must ensure that the *American partnership strengthens India's global power* while the *Iranian partnership protects India's Eurasian access*.

13.4 Future of India's Balancing Policy

The future of India's balancing policy between Iran and the United States will be one of the most delicate tests of Indian statecraft in the twenty-first century. India's foreign policy cannot be conducted through rigid binaries because the global order itself has become fluid, fragmented and competitive. The United States remains indispensable for India's defence modernization, high technology, trade, investment, education, diaspora strength, maritime security and Indo-Pacific strategy. Iran remains indispensable for India's westward connectivity, Chabahar, Afghanistan access, Central Asia policy, energy security, civilizational diplomacy and Eurasian outreach. Therefore, India's future policy must not choose between *Washington's strategic utility* and *Tehran's geographical indispensability*; it must carefully preserve both.

India's balancing policy must be understood as an evolved form of *strategic autonomy*. In the Cold War, India used non-alignment to protect decision-making freedom amid bipolar rivalry. In the present age, India uses *multi-alignment* to maximize partnerships in a multipolar and issue-based world. The difference is significant. Non-alignment often emphasized distance from blocs; multi-alignment emphasizes purposeful engagement with multiple powers. India's future Iran–United States policy will therefore be based not on passive neutrality but on active, interest-driven diplomacy.

The future of this balancing will depend on India's ability to manage four major pressures: American sanctions pressure on Iran, Iran's expectations from India, China's expanding role in Iran and West Asia, and India's own need for strategic flexibility. If India leans too far toward Washington's sanctions framework, Tehran may move closer to China and India's Chabahar position may weaken. If India ignores American concerns completely, India–U.S. defence, technology and trade cooperation may face friction. Hence, India must practise *calibrated equilibrium*, not emotional alignment.

India's balancing policy must also be guided by geography. The United States is a global strategic partner, but it is geographically distant from India's immediate western access problem. Iran is geographically essential because it offers India the route to Afghanistan, Central Asia and the International North–South Transport Corridor. A major power cannot allow external pressure to close its strategic routes. Therefore, India's future policy must insist that Chabahar and related connectivity projects are not anti-American projects; they are instruments of regional stability, humanitarian movement and lawful commerce.

The future will also require institutional depth. Balancing cannot depend only on occasional high-level visits or crisis-driven negotiations. India must create durable mechanisms: regular India–Iran consultations, India–U.S. strategic dialogues, sanctions-compliance discussions, Chabahar working groups, Central Asia connectivity forums, energy dialogues, banking consultations and private-sector confidence-building. The more institutionalized the policy becomes, the less vulnerable it will be to sudden diplomatic shocks.

In the language of classical geopolitical thought, the future of India's balancing policy lies at the intersection of Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History*, and Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace*. India needs the maritime order where the United States remains influential; it also needs access to the Eurasian interior where Iran becomes necessary. India's diplomacy must therefore reconcile *sea power partnership* with *continental corridor strategy*.

In conclusion, the future of India's balancing policy will depend on maturity, patience, execution and credibility. India must preserve its U.S. partnership without surrendering Iran, and preserve its Iran engagement without undermining its U.S. relationship. In refined diplomatic language, India's future task is to construct a *sovereign diplomatic bridge between American strategic partnership and Iranian corridor indispensability*.

13.4.1 Managing Pressure

Managing pressure will be the first and most immediate requirement of India's future balancing policy. Pressure will come from multiple directions. The United States may continue to use sanctions, financial restrictions and diplomatic persuasion to limit engagement with Iran. Iran may expect India

to show greater independence from Washington and maintain Chabahar, energy ties and political contact. China may expand its presence in Iran, creating competitive pressure on India. Gulf states and Israel may also influence the regional environment. India must therefore navigate a dense field of *external expectations and strategic constraints*.

The most important pressure will continue to arise from sanctions. American sanctions on Iran affect oil imports, banking, shipping, insurance, port investment, private-sector participation and technology transfer. Even when India wants to engage Iran, Indian companies may hesitate because they fear secondary sanctions, denial of dollar access and reputational risk. Therefore, India must manage not only diplomatic pressure but also corporate caution. A government may decide strategically, but business executes commercially. If business fears sanctions, policy remains incomplete.

India's management of pressure must therefore include legal clarity. Indian companies, banks, port operators, insurance providers and logistics firms need clear government guidance regarding what is permitted and what is risky. Chabahar-related trade, humanitarian shipments, food, medicine and regional connectivity must be supported through transparent compliance mechanisms. Legal ambiguity weakens strategic projects. India must convert diplomatic intention into operational confidence.

Pressure management also requires continuous conversation with the United States. India must explain that its engagement with Iran is not designed to weaken American interests. Chabahar supports Afghanistan, Central Asia, humanitarian supplies and regional connectivity. It reduces the possibility that Afghanistan becomes dependent on destabilizing or monopolistic routes. It also gives Iran a stake in constructive regional behaviour. India should present Chabahar as a *stability corridor*, not a sanctions-evasion mechanism.

At the same time, India must manage Iranian expectations. Tehran often feels that New Delhi moves too cautiously under American pressure. Iran may compare India's hesitation with China's willingness to buy Iranian oil and expand economic engagement. India must therefore communicate honestly with Iran regarding legal constraints while demonstrating seriousness in areas where cooperation remains possible. Delay without explanation creates mistrust; explanation without implementation creates frustration. India must provide both explanation and execution.

India must also manage domestic pressure. In India, different policy communities prioritize different relationships. Strategic analysts may emphasize the United States and Indo-Pacific; energy experts may emphasize Iran's oil and gas; connectivity scholars may emphasize Chabahar; businesses may emphasize sanctions risk; cultural scholars may emphasize civilizational relations. The government must integrate these views into a coherent policy. Balancing begins at home before it succeeds abroad.

Managing pressure also means avoiding rhetorical extremism. India should not publicly frame Iran only as a victim of Western policy, nor should it frame Iran only as a sanctions problem. Similarly, India should not treat the United States only as a pressure power; it is also a major strategic partner. Diplomatic language must remain measured, dignified and interest-based. Mature states do not shout their autonomy; they practise it.

Pressure may also arise during crises. If U.S.–Iran tensions escalate militarily, India may face evacuation concerns for citizens in the Gulf, oil-price shocks, maritime-insurance problems, and pressure to take positions. India must prepare contingency plans for shipping, energy, diaspora protection and diplomatic mediation. Crisis management is part of balancing. A policy that works only in peace is incomplete.

India's long-term answer to pressure is capacity. The stronger India becomes economically, technologically, militarily and diplomatically, the more pressure it can absorb. Strategic autonomy requires resilience. Energy diversification, defence production, digital capability, foreign-exchange strength, maritime security and diversified partnerships all strengthen India's negotiating power. A capable India can manage pressure better than a dependent India.

In conclusion, managing pressure will require legal prudence, diplomatic conversation, Iranian reassurance, American negotiation, domestic coherence and crisis preparedness. India must neither bend impulsively nor defy recklessly. In the elevated language of diplomacy, India must practise *composure under pressure*, ensuring that external force does not become internal paralysis.

13.4.2 Protecting National Interest

Protecting national interest is the central purpose of India's balancing policy. National interest is not a slogan; it is the disciplined protection of security,

sovereignty, prosperity, energy access, technology growth, territorial integrity, maritime safety, regional influence and civilizational dignity. In the context of Iran and the United States, India's national interest requires maintaining strong relations with Washington while preserving the strategic utility of Tehran. Any policy that sacrifices one entirely for the other would be strategically impoverished.

India's first national interest is security. The United States contributes to India's defence modernization, maritime domain awareness, counter-terrorism cooperation, intelligence sharing and Indo-Pacific balancing. Iran contributes indirectly to India's security by providing access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, reducing Pakistan's transit monopoly and supporting regional connectivity. Both relationships serve different security purposes. India must protect both without confusing their functions.

India's second national interest is sovereignty. India cannot allow external powers to dictate its regional connectivity strategy. Chabahar is connected with India's sovereign right to access Afghanistan and Central Asia through legal and mutually agreed routes. India must therefore defend Chabahar diplomatically as a legitimate project. At the same time, India must protect its sovereignty concerns regarding projects such as CPEC, which pass through territory India regards as under illegal Pakistani occupation. Sovereignty must remain a consistent principle.

India's third national interest is energy security. India's economy requires stable, affordable and diversified energy supplies. Although sanctions have limited Iranian oil imports, Iran remains a potential energy partner. India should not permanently close the Iranian option. Future geopolitical conditions may change, and India must remain ready to revive energy cooperation when legally and commercially feasible. Energy policy must be flexible, not ideological.

India's fourth national interest is connectivity. Pakistan's denial of land transit has historically restricted India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran provides the alternative. Chabahar, INSTC and Iranian routes are therefore central to India's westward strategy. Protecting national interest means ensuring that these routes do not remain symbolic. They must become operational, commercially usable and diplomatically protected.

India's fifth national interest is technology and economic modernization. The United States is a crucial partner in advanced technology, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, clean energy, space, defence innovation, higher education and trade. India cannot weaken this partnership for symbolic gestures. National interest requires India to draw maximum benefit from U.S. cooperation while preserving independent judgement. This is *strategic utilization without strategic subordination*.

India's sixth national interest is balancing China. The United States is useful in the Indo-Pacific balance; Iran is useful in balancing China–Pakistan corridor politics in the west. China's presence in Gwadar, CPEC, Central Asia and Iran requires India to remain active across both maritime and continental theatres. A strong U.S. partnership helps India in the Indo-Pacific; a strong Iran partnership helps India in Eurasian access. Both are part of India's China strategy, though in different forms.

India's seventh national interest is protecting its diaspora and economic links in West Asia. Millions of Indians live and work in the Gulf and wider West Asia. Any U.S.–Iran military crisis can affect their safety, remittances, shipping routes and energy markets. India's balancing policy must therefore avoid actions that inflame regional tensions and should support dialogue, restraint and de-escalation. Stability in West Asia is not abstract diplomacy; it affects Indian households.

India's eighth national interest is diplomatic credibility. India seeks to be recognized as a responsible major power. A responsible major power maintains commitments, respects international law, supports regional stability and speaks with independence. India must show the United States that it is a reliable partner, and show Iran that it is not merely a weather-dependent friend. Credibility is built by consistency.

Protecting national interest also requires avoiding sentimentalism. India–Iran civilizational ties are valuable, but they cannot replace economic execution. India–U.S. democratic convergence is valuable, but it cannot erase geopolitical differences. National interest requires clear-eyed evaluation. Friendship must be respected, but policy must be calculated.

In conclusion, protecting national interest means preserving India's freedom to act, access, trade, secure energy, develop technology, balance China and maintain regional influence. Iran and the United States both contribute to

these goals in distinct ways. In refined geopolitical vocabulary, India's national interest demands a *dual-track diplomacy in which American capability and Iranian geography are both harnessed for India's rise*.

13.4.3 Multi-Alignment in Foreign Policy

Multi-alignment is the most suitable framework for India's future foreign policy in a fragmented world. It means building multiple partnerships simultaneously without entering rigid blocs or surrendering decision-making autonomy. India's engagement with the United States, Iran, Russia, France, Japan, Gulf states, Israel, ASEAN, Central Asia and Africa reflects this approach. Multi-alignment is not confusion; it is *structured diplomatic plurality*.

The world has moved beyond the simplicity of Cold War bipolarity. Power is distributed across several centres: the United States remains powerful; China is rising; Russia remains militarily significant; Europe retains economic and normative influence; Gulf states have energy and capital; Japan and Australia shape Indo-Pacific order; Iran and Turkey influence West Asian geopolitics; Central Asia matters for Eurasian connectivity. In such a world, India cannot attach itself exclusively to one camp. It must maintain issue-based partnerships.

In the Iran–United States context, multi-alignment allows India to cooperate with Washington in defence, technology, trade and Indo-Pacific strategy while maintaining relations with Tehran in Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, culture and potential energy cooperation. This approach prevents India from becoming trapped in U.S.–Iran hostility. It also prevents India from sacrificing its long-term westward interests for short-term diplomatic comfort.

Multi-alignment is different from opportunism. Opportunism lacks principles; multi-alignment is guided by national interest, sovereignty, strategic autonomy and issue-based cooperation. India can support freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific with the United States, maintain energy and defence ties with Russia, develop Chabahar with Iran, build ties with Israel, deepen partnerships with Gulf Arab states and cooperate with Central Asia. These are not contradictions if managed carefully; they are components of India's comprehensive external engagement.

India's multi-alignment also reflects its civilizational personality. India has historically interacted with multiple worlds: Persianate, Islamic, Central Asian, Southeast Asian, European, African and maritime. Its foreign policy naturally resists exclusivist alignment. The Indian tradition of statecraft, from *Arthashastra* to modern strategic autonomy, recognizes flexible engagement based on circumstances. Multi-alignment is therefore not merely a modern tactic; it has roots in India's strategic culture.

The United States may sometimes prefer clearer alignment from India, especially regarding Iran, Russia or China. Iran may sometimes expect stronger resistance to American pressure. Russia may expect continuity in defence cooperation. Gulf states may expect balanced West Asian policy. India must manage all these expectations. Multi-alignment requires diplomatic discipline because every partner watches how India treats other partners. The art lies in making each partner understand the specific logic of cooperation.

Multi-alignment also requires economic diversification. India must not depend excessively on one country for energy, technology, defence, investment or trade. It should diversify oil suppliers, defence production, technology partnerships, manufacturing supply chains and connectivity routes. The broader India's options, the stronger its autonomy. Multi-alignment becomes real only when supported by material capability.

In relation to Iran, multi-alignment means India should not abandon Chabahar because of U.S. pressure, but it should also not conduct Iran policy in a way that recklessly endangers India–U.S. partnership. It must use negotiation, legal compliance, humanitarian framing, commercial seriousness and diplomatic patience. This is *balanced assertiveness*.

In relation to the United States, multi-alignment means India should deepen cooperation without becoming dependent. India should benefit from American technology, investment and defence cooperation while preserving its independent relations with Iran, Russia and other partners. The United States should understand that India's value lies precisely in its independent weight. A strategically autonomous India is a stronger partner than a dependent India.

Multi-alignment also helps India manage China. China challenges India on the border, in the Indian Ocean, through Pakistan, through BRI and through

influence in Iran and Central Asia. India cannot answer China through one partnership alone. It needs the United States in the Indo-Pacific, Iran for westward access, Russia for Eurasian balance, Japan and Australia for maritime cooperation, France for defence and Indian Ocean engagement, and Gulf states for energy and capital. Multi-alignment is therefore India's grand strategy for a China-shaped world.

In conclusion, multi-alignment is the future grammar of Indian foreign policy. It allows India to engage competing powers, avoid dependency, protect national interest and expand global influence. In the refined language of international relations, multi-alignment is India's *diplomatic architecture of autonomy in an age of competitive interdependence*.

Concluding Observation

The future of India's balancing policy between Iran and the United States will depend upon India's ability to manage pressure, protect national interest and practise multi-alignment with confidence. India must remain close to the United States without becoming captive to American sanctions policy. It must remain engaged with Iran without ignoring the realities of global financial power. It must protect Chabahar, preserve energy options, strengthen technology partnerships, maintain regional stability and deepen strategic autonomy.

India's policy should not be described as hesitation. It is a complex and deliberate effort to protect multiple national interests at once. The United States strengthens India's global and Indo-Pacific power; Iran strengthens India's westward and Eurasian access. A wise Indian policy will not sacrifice either. In the broader framework of India's rise, the future belongs to a diplomacy that is *autonomous in judgement, flexible in method, firm in interest and civilizationally confident in conduct*.

Chapter 14:

India–Iran Relations and Israel–Gulf Politics

India–Iran relations cannot be fully analysed without understanding the influence of *Israel–Gulf politics*. West Asia is not a single diplomatic theatre; it is a dense and combustible strategic arena where Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Turkey and external powers interact through diplomacy, energy, religion, security, trade, technology, military alliances and proxy conflicts. For India, this region is indispensable because it supplies energy, hosts millions of Indian workers, generates remittances, supports trade, affects maritime routes, and influences India's relations with the Islamic world, Israel, the United States and Iran. Therefore, India's West Asia policy is an exercise in *multi-vector balancing*.

India's relationship with Israel has become one of the most important transformations in India's post-Cold War foreign policy. For decades, India supported the Palestinian cause and maintained limited engagement with Israel. However, after the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992, India–Israel relations expanded rapidly in defence, agriculture, water, science, innovation, cyber security, homeland security, counter-terrorism and technology. Israel became a valuable partner for India because it possessed advanced defence systems, desert agriculture expertise, water-management technology, intelligence capability and innovation culture. This relationship gradually moved from quiet cooperation to open strategic partnership.

At the same time, Iran remains important for India because of energy memory, Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, INSTC and civilizational links. Iran and Israel, however, are bitter rivals. Their hostility affects the entire region through nuclear tensions, missile threats, cyber operations, proxy conflicts, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, Yemen, Iraq and the Gulf. Thus, India must maintain close relations with Israel without destroying its relationship with Iran. This is not a simple diplomatic task; it is a refined exercise in *de-hyphenated and differentiated diplomacy*.

The Gulf states further complicate the equation. India has strong ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait. These countries are important for oil, gas, investment, diaspora welfare, food security, maritime cooperation and trade. Some Gulf states have normalized or deepened relations with Israel, while also managing their own tensions or engagements with Iran. This evolving regional architecture gives India both opportunity and risk. India can cooperate with Israel and Gulf states in technology, energy, logistics and infrastructure, but it must avoid being drawn into anti-Iran alignments that could damage Chabahar and Iran relations.

In the language of classical geopolitics, West Asia is a *rimland theatre* where land power, sea power and energy power intersect. Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* helps explain the importance of sea lanes, ports and chokepoints; Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History* helps explain why Iran and the Eurasian interior matter; Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace* helps explain why the rimland between Europe, Asia and Africa remains decisive. India's diplomacy in this region must therefore combine *maritime prudence, continental access* and *regional equilibrium*.

14.1 India and Israel

India and Israel have moved from hesitant engagement to a deep and multidimensional partnership. This transformation is one of the most significant shifts in India's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. The relationship today includes defence, technology, agriculture, water, innovation, cyber security, space, homeland security, start-up cooperation, trade, education, tourism and political dialogue. It is a relationship built not merely on sentiment, but on *functional convergence*.

The India–Israel relationship is distinctive because both states see themselves as old civilizations confronting modern security challenges. India faces terrorism, border threats, cyber vulnerabilities, water stress and agricultural pressure. Israel has developed advanced technologies in defence, intelligence, water conservation, desert farming, precision agriculture and innovation. This creates a natural field of cooperation. India's scale and Israel's technological specialization complement each other. In strategic language, Israel offers India *high-value niche capabilities*.

India's approach to Israel has also changed because India has increasingly separated its Israel policy from its Palestine policy. Earlier, India often treated relations with Israel through the prism of Palestine and Arab opinion. In the contemporary period, India maintains strong ties with Israel while continuing to support a negotiated two-state solution for Palestine. This is often described as *de-hyphenation*. It allows India to pursue practical cooperation with Israel without formally abandoning its traditional support for Palestinian statehood.

India's engagement with Israel also intersects with Gulf politics. The emergence of the Abraham Accords, the rise of India–UAE strategic partnership, and the I2U2 grouping involving India, Israel, the UAE and the United States show that Israel is no longer isolated from the wider regional economic architecture. India can now cooperate with Israel and Gulf partners in food security, water, technology, logistics and investment. This creates a new regional geometry in which India's Israel policy is linked with Gulf modernization.

However, India must manage this relationship carefully because Iran views Israel as a hostile power. If India's Israel partnership appears openly anti-Iranian, Tehran may become suspicious of India's intentions. India's strategy is therefore to keep India–Israel cooperation focused on defence modernization, technology, agriculture, water, innovation and economic development, while maintaining separate engagement with Iran on connectivity, Chabahar, Afghanistan and Central Asia. This is *compartmentalized diplomacy*.

In conclusion, India–Israel relations represent the rise of pragmatic statecraft in Indian foreign policy. India values Israel as a defence and technology partner, but it does not wish to become part of Israel's conflict with Iran. The relationship is strong, yet India's regional policy remains balanced. In elevated diplomatic language, Israel is India's *technological-security partner*, while Iran remains India's *geographical-connectivity partner*.

14.1.1 Defence Relations

Defence relations form the strongest pillar of India–Israel cooperation. Israel has emerged as one of India's important defence partners because it provides high-quality military technology, surveillance systems, missiles, drones, radars, precision weapons, electronic warfare systems, border-management

solutions and counter-terrorism capabilities. India's security environment—marked by terrorism, border disputes, maritime risks and technological warfare—makes Israeli defence expertise particularly valuable.

The defence relationship deepened after the 1990s because both countries faced non-conventional security challenges. India confronted cross-border terrorism and military pressure along its borders; Israel faced rocket attacks, terrorism, hostile non-state actors and regional threats. Both countries developed a shared understanding of *asymmetric warfare*, where adversaries may not operate only through conventional armies but also through militias, terror networks, cyber operations, drones and missiles. This similarity strengthened defence cooperation.

Israeli systems have been valuable to India because they often combine battlefield experience with technological innovation. Israel's defence industry is known for rapid adaptation, compact systems, real-time surveillance, unmanned platforms, missile defence, precision targeting and intelligence integration. India, with its large armed forces and complex security requirements, found such capabilities useful. Defence cooperation therefore moved beyond ordinary procurement into *strategic technology acquisition*.

India-Israel defence ties also include joint working groups, high-level visits, military exchanges, exercises and industrial collaboration. Defence cooperation has gradually moved from buyer-seller relations toward co-development and production possibilities. This is important for India's *Make in India* and defence-indigenization goals. India seeks not merely to import weapons but to absorb technology, build domestic capacity and strengthen its own defence-industrial base.

The relationship is also important in the maritime domain. Israeli systems related to surveillance, drones, sensors and communications can support India's maritime security, especially in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. The security of sea lanes from the Gulf is vital for India's energy imports. Defence cooperation with Israel thus indirectly supports India's West Asian and Indian Ocean interests.

Counter-terrorism is another central component. India and Israel both have long experience dealing with terrorism. Intelligence sharing, urban-security methods, border protection, aviation security, cyber monitoring and

emergency response are areas of convergence. However, India must ensure that counter-terrorism cooperation remains framed in universal security terms and does not appear as civilizational or religious alignment against any region or community. This is essential for India's plural diplomatic identity.

The defence partnership with Israel also has implications for Iran. Iran closely watches India's military cooperation with Israel because Israel is Tehran's principal regional adversary. India must therefore maintain transparency in its strategic posture: India's defence relationship with Israel is meant for India's own security needs, not for participation in anti-Iran coalitions. This distinction is crucial for preserving India–Iran trust.

In conclusion, India–Israel defence relations are based on practical security needs, technological complementarity and shared counter-terrorism concerns. They give India valuable capabilities and strengthen its defence modernization. In refined strategic vocabulary, Israel has become India's *precision-security partner in an age of hybrid warfare*.

14.1.2 Technology Cooperation

Technology cooperation is the second major pillar of India–Israel relations. Israel is widely known as a *start-up nation*, with excellence in innovation, cyber security, water technology, agriculture, defence electronics, medical devices, artificial intelligence, precision irrigation, desert farming and high-end research. India, with its large market, digital economy, scientific talent and development needs, offers scale. This creates a powerful partnership between *Israeli innovation* and *Indian scale*.

Agriculture has been one of the most visible fields of cooperation. Israel's expertise in drip irrigation, greenhouse cultivation, desert agriculture, seed technology, protected farming, dairy management, horticulture and water efficiency is relevant to India's agricultural transformation. India's farmers face water scarcity, climate stress, low productivity and market pressure. Israeli agricultural technology can help improve productivity while conserving resources. The Centres of Excellence established across India represent this practical cooperation.

Water cooperation is equally significant. India faces water stress, urban water loss, groundwater depletion and irrigation inefficiency. Israel has developed advanced water recycling, desalination, drip irrigation, wastewater treatment and water-management systems. India–Israel cooperation in water is

therefore not merely technical; it is developmental. Water security is becoming a strategic issue, and Israel's experience offers India valuable lessons.

Science and innovation cooperation has expanded through research funds, university partnerships, industrial R&D mechanisms and start-up collaboration. Areas such as artificial intelligence, climate technology, food security, medical technology, cyber security and digital systems are increasingly important. In a world where technology is power, India-Israel cooperation has strategic significance beyond ordinary commerce.

Cyber security is another critical field. As India digitizes governance, finance, infrastructure, defence and public services, cyber threats become more serious. Israel's experience in cyber defence, intelligence and digital security is highly valuable. Cooperation in this field can strengthen India's cyber resilience. However, cyber cooperation must be handled carefully because technology partnerships often involve sensitive data, privacy, encryption and strategic trust.

Technology cooperation also connects India, Israel and the Gulf. Through frameworks such as I2U2, technology, food corridors, clean energy, logistics and investment can bring India, Israel, the UAE and the United States together. This is a new form of *minilateral geo-economics*. It allows India to participate in West Asian modernization without being trapped only in oil politics.

For India, technology cooperation with Israel is also a way to strengthen domestic development. Israeli technology in agriculture and water can help rural India; innovation cooperation can help start-ups; defence technology can support national security; health technology can support medical systems. Thus, the relationship is not only strategic but also developmental.

Iran may view some India-Israel technology cooperation with caution, especially if it involves cyber, defence or intelligence. India must therefore separate civilian and developmental cooperation from regional military alignments. India's diplomatic message should be clear: technology cooperation with Israel is for India's modernization, not for hostility toward Iran.

In conclusion, India-Israel technology cooperation is a powerful example of functional diplomacy. It links innovation with development, science with

security, and start-ups with national transformation. In elevated language, technology cooperation is the *knowledge corridor through which India and Israel convert innovation into strategic capacity*.

14.1.3 India's Strategic Partnership With Israel

India's strategic partnership with Israel reflects the maturity of a relationship that has moved beyond secrecy, hesitation and political discomfort. The partnership today is openly acknowledged, institutionally supported and functionally diversified. It includes defence, technology, agriculture, water, cyber security, innovation, trade, education, tourism, diaspora connections and high-level political dialogue. It is one of the clearest examples of India's contemporary *interest-based foreign policy*.

The strategic partnership was enabled by major shifts in the international system. The end of the Cold War reduced ideological barriers. India's economic liberalization increased its need for technology and trade. The rise of terrorism sharpened security cooperation. The transformation of India's relations with the United States and Gulf states reduced old diplomatic constraints. Israel's own outreach to Asia created new opportunities. Together, these factors allowed India and Israel to build a partnership without excessive political embarrassment.

The partnership is strategic because it serves core Indian interests. Israel contributes to India's defence modernization, border security, counter-terrorism, cyber security, agriculture, water management and innovation. These are not peripheral areas. They relate directly to India's security, food security, technological rise and development. A country that helps India solve difficult internal and external problems becomes strategically valuable.

The partnership is also politically significant because it shows India's ability to pursue relations independently. India no longer allows one relationship to automatically block another. It can cooperate with Israel while supporting Palestinian statehood; it can engage Iran while deepening Israel ties; it can work with Gulf states while preserving its strategic autonomy. This is the practical meaning of *multi-alignment* in West Asia.

India's strategic partnership with Israel also benefits from people-to-people links. Indian Jews in Israel, Indian caregivers, students, workers, diamond traders, IT professionals and cultural exchanges create human bridges. Though smaller than India's Gulf diaspora, this human dimension gives

warmth to the relationship. Civilizational respect between Indian and Jewish communities also strengthens mutual understanding.

The relationship also has an economic dimension. Trade has expanded into diamonds, chemicals, electronics, communications, medical equipment, agriculture technology and high-tech products. The acquisition of Haifa Port by an India-led consortium added a maritime-economic dimension to the relationship. Such developments show that India–Israel ties are no longer limited to weapons and intelligence; they include infrastructure and commercial connectivity.

However, the partnership must be managed within India’s larger West Asia policy. India cannot allow its Israel partnership to damage its relations with Iran or Arab states. India’s success lies in maintaining strong Israel ties while also having strong relations with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Palestine and Iran. This requires diplomatic restraint and avoidance of ideological over-identification with any regional conflict.

In conclusion, India’s strategic partnership with Israel is a major achievement of modern Indian diplomacy. It is built on security, technology, innovation and political trust. Yet it must remain embedded within India’s broader regional balance. In refined diplomatic vocabulary, Israel is India’s *strategic innovation partner*, but India’s West Asia policy remains *plural, balanced and autonomy-driven*.

14.2 Iran and Israel Rivalry

The rivalry between Iran and Israel is one of the most dangerous and destabilizing conflicts in West Asia. It combines ideology, security, nuclear suspicion, missile capabilities, proxy warfare, cyber operations, covert action, regional alliances and great-power involvement. It is not a conventional territorial dispute because Iran and Israel do not share a border. Rather, it is a *transregional security rivalry* fought through Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Gaza, Yemen, the Red Sea, cyberspace and occasionally direct military exchanges.

Iran and Israel were not always enemies. Before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran under the Shah maintained discreet cooperation with Israel. The revolution transformed Iran’s ideological posture and made opposition to Israel a central component of the Islamic Republic’s regional identity. Israel, in turn, came to view revolutionary Iran as a major ideological and security

threat. Over time, the rivalry deepened around Iran's nuclear programme, Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria, missile development, Gulf security and regional influence.

The rivalry is dangerous because it has both direct and indirect dimensions. The indirect dimension includes Iran's support for armed groups hostile to Israel and Israel's strikes against Iranian-linked targets in Syria and elsewhere. The direct dimension became more visible after Iran and Israel exchanged attacks in 2024 and 2025. This shift from shadow conflict to open confrontation increased the risk of wider regional war.

For India, the Iran–Israel rivalry creates a diplomatic dilemma. India has strong ties with Israel and important ties with Iran. If conflict escalates, India faces risks to energy supplies, shipping through the Gulf, diaspora safety, Chabahar, trade, investment and regional stability. India therefore prefers restraint, de-escalation and dialogue. India's interest is not in choosing sides but in preventing a regional firestorm.

14.2.1 Ideological Conflict

The ideological conflict between Iran and Israel emerged after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Islamic Republic defined itself as an anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and revolutionary state. Opposition to Israel became part of its ideological identity, linked with support for the Palestinian cause, resistance to Western influence and rejection of Israeli regional power. This ideological posture gave Iran a claim to leadership among anti-Israel movements in the region.

For Israel, Iran's ideological hostility is interpreted as an existential threat. Israeli leaders view Iran's rhetoric, missile programme, nuclear activities and support for armed groups as part of a broader strategy to weaken or destroy Israel. Israel therefore treats Iran not merely as a hostile state but as a central security adversary. This mutual hostility creates a deep *identity-security conflict*.

The ideological conflict is also linked with the Palestinian question. Iran presents support for Palestine as a moral and revolutionary duty. Israel sees Iran's support for Palestinian armed groups as sponsorship of terrorism. This produces irreconcilable narratives. For Iran, resistance is liberation; for Israel, it is aggression. Such narrative opposition makes diplomatic compromise extremely difficult.

Religion and revolutionary legitimacy also shape Iran's position. The Islamic Republic uses the Palestinian issue and opposition to Israel to strengthen its revolutionary credentials domestically and regionally. This ideological posture helps Iran appeal to groups across the region, even beyond Shia communities. It gives Tehran a political language of resistance against Israel and the United States.

Israel's ideological self-understanding is also central. Israel defines itself as the homeland of the Jewish people and a state surrounded by hostile actors. The memory of persecution and security vulnerability shapes Israeli strategic culture. Therefore, Iranian statements questioning Israel's legitimacy are seen in Israel through the lens of historical trauma and existential insecurity. This gives the conflict profound emotional intensity.

The ideological rivalry has been reinforced by education, media, political speeches, religious symbolism and regional propaganda. Both sides use language that hardens public opinion. Once ideological narratives become institutionalized, diplomatic flexibility becomes difficult. Leaders fear appearing weak before domestic constituencies. Thus, ideology becomes a *prison of policy*.

For India, this ideological conflict is difficult because India has relations with both states. India cannot adopt Iran's anti-Israel ideological position because Israel is a strategic partner. India cannot adopt Israel's anti-Iran maximalism because Iran is essential for India's connectivity and regional policy. India therefore avoids ideological alignment and emphasizes practical national interest. This is *de-ideologized diplomacy*.

In conclusion, the ideological conflict between Iran and Israel is rooted in revolutionary identity, Zionism, Palestinian politics, historical insecurity and regional legitimacy. It gives the rivalry emotional force and makes compromise difficult. In elevated analytical language, the Iran–Israel ideological conflict is a *war of legitimacy before it becomes a war of missiles*.

14.2.2 Military and Security Tensions

Military and security tensions between Iran and Israel have intensified over the past two decades. These tensions involve Iran's nuclear programme, ballistic missiles, drones, cyber operations, Israeli airstrikes, assassinations, sabotage, maritime incidents and direct missile exchanges. The rivalry has

gradually moved from covert action to more open confrontation. This has made West Asia one of the most volatile strategic theatres in the world.

Israel views Iran's nuclear programme as the most serious long-term threat. Iran insists that its nuclear programme is peaceful, but Israel suspects that Tehran seeks the capability to develop nuclear weapons. This suspicion has driven Israeli diplomacy, intelligence operations, cyber activities and military planning. Israel has repeatedly declared that it will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Thus, the nuclear issue is the central security anxiety.

Iran views Israel as an aggressive regional actor supported by the United States. Tehran argues that Israel conducts assassinations, sabotage, airstrikes and cyber operations against Iran and Iranian-linked forces. Iran also views Israeli cooperation with Gulf states as an attempt to encircle or contain Iran. This perception strengthens Tehran's reliance on missiles, drones and regional allies. The result is a classic *security dilemma*: each side's defensive measures appear offensive to the other.

Missile and drone capabilities are central to the military rivalry. Iran has developed ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones as tools of deterrence and retaliation. Israel has advanced air power, intelligence systems, missile defence, cyber capabilities and precision-strike capacity. The interaction between Iranian missiles and Israeli air/missile defence systems creates a technological competition. This competition is not theoretical; it has been tested in real crises.

Cyber warfare has also become important. Attacks on nuclear facilities, ports, water systems, transport networks and military infrastructure have been reported over the years. Cyber conflict allows states to damage each other without immediate open war, but it also creates ambiguity and risk of escalation. In the Iran–Israel rivalry, cyberspace is a *silent battlefield*.

Syria has been a major military theatre. Iran supported the Syrian government and built networks of influence there, while Israel conducted repeated strikes against Iranian-linked military infrastructure and weapons transfers to Hezbollah. Israel's objective has been to prevent Iran from establishing a threatening military presence near Israel's borders. Iran's objective has been to preserve strategic depth and support allied forces. Syria thus became a *forward arena* of the Iran–Israel conflict.

The direct exchanges of 2024 and 2025 marked a dangerous escalation. Iran's direct attacks on Israeli territory and Israel's strikes against Iranian targets showed that the old shadow-war model had weakened. When states attack each other directly, escalation risks multiply. Miscalculation, domestic pressure, alliance commitments and technological uncertainty can rapidly widen conflict.

For India, these tensions are dangerous because they threaten regional stability. Any Iran–Israel war can raise oil prices, disrupt shipping, endanger Indian nationals, complicate Chabahar, affect Gulf states and disturb global markets. India's response must therefore prioritize restraint, safety of civilians, protection of diaspora, energy security and diplomatic de-escalation.

In conclusion, Iran–Israel military and security tensions are driven by nuclear suspicion, missile deterrence, cyber operations, proxy warfare and direct retaliation. The rivalry has become more dangerous because covert conflict has increasingly touched open warfare. In refined security vocabulary, the Iran–Israel military rivalry is a *hybrid conflict system moving along the dangerous ladder from shadow war to direct confrontation*.

14.2.3 Regional Proxy Conflicts

Regional proxy conflicts are the most extensive and persistent dimension of the Iran–Israel rivalry. Iran has built relationships with armed non-state actors and allied militias across West Asia, often described as the *Axis of Resistance*. These include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, armed groups in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen and networks that once operated extensively through Syria. Israel views this network as a strategic encirclement designed to threaten it from multiple fronts.

Hezbollah is the most important proxy actor in the Iran–Israel rivalry. Established with Iranian support during the Lebanese conflict of the early 1980s, Hezbollah has become a powerful military and political force in Lebanon. For Iran, Hezbollah provides deterrence against Israel and strategic depth on Israel's northern border. For Israel, Hezbollah is one of the most dangerous non-state military adversaries because of its rockets, missiles, tunnels, fighters and political influence. Lebanon has therefore become a major theatre of Iran–Israel confrontation.

Gaza is another key front. Iran has supported Palestinian armed groups, though the relationships are complex and sometimes influenced by ideological, sectarian and strategic factors. Israel sees Iranian assistance to such groups as part of a broader strategy to pressure Israel through multiple fronts. The October 2023 Hamas attack and subsequent Gaza war intensified regional polarization and widened the conflict environment. Iran used the Palestinian issue to strengthen its regional narrative, while Israel intensified its security posture.

Syria has served as a logistical and military corridor. Iran used Syria to support Hezbollah and maintain influence near Israel's borders. Israel repeatedly targeted Iranian-linked positions, weapons transfers and military infrastructure in Syria. The Syrian theatre demonstrates how a civil war can become a regional battleground. Local conflict, great-power involvement and Iran–Israel rivalry became intertwined.

Iraq is also important because Iran-aligned militias operate there. These groups have sometimes targeted U.S. interests and are part of Iran's wider regional influence structure. For Israel, Iraq is less immediate than Lebanon or Syria, but the presence of Iran-aligned armed groups contributes to the wider strategic environment. It gives Iran additional depth and creates pressure on U.S. regional posture.

Yemen and the Red Sea have added a maritime dimension. The Houthis, aligned with Iran, have threatened or attacked shipping connected with Israel and Western interests. This affects global trade and energy movement through the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb. For India, this is especially important because maritime disruptions affect shipping costs, trade routes and energy security. Thus, Iran–Israel proxy conflict can reach Indian economic interests through sea lanes.

Proxy warfare gives Iran strategic advantages. It allows Tehran to project influence without always engaging directly. It complicates Israel's security environment by creating multiple fronts. It gives Iran deterrence by raising the cost of Israeli strikes. However, proxy warfare also creates risks for Iran. Proxies may act independently, provoke escalation, or become weakened by Israeli military operations. The proxy model is powerful but unstable.

For Israel, countering proxies requires intelligence, airstrikes, missile defence, border operations, cyber tools and sometimes ground campaigns.

Israel seeks to prevent weapon transfers, degrade militant capabilities and deter attacks. However, military pressure can also create humanitarian crises, international criticism and long-term instability. Proxy conflicts rarely produce clean victories. They generate cycles of retaliation.

India's interest lies in preventing proxy conflicts from destabilizing the region. India has citizens, trade, energy routes and diplomatic relationships across West Asia. A conflict in Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, Yemen or the Red Sea can affect India through evacuation operations, oil prices, shipping routes and political pressure. India therefore prefers de-escalation and dialogue rather than military widening.

In conclusion, regional proxy conflicts are the operational backbone of Iran–Israel rivalry. They turn local conflicts into regional crises and convert ideological hostility into practical military pressure. In elevated geopolitical language, proxy warfare is the *extended battlefield through which Iran and Israel fight without always declaring war upon each other*.

Concluding Observation

India–Iran relations and Israel–Gulf politics are connected through a delicate strategic triangle. India values Israel for defence, technology, agriculture, water, innovation and counter-terrorism. India values Iran for Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy security and civilizational depth. Iran and Israel, however, are locked in a rivalry that involves ideology, nuclear suspicion, missile threats, cyber operations and proxy conflicts across Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, Iraq, Yemen and the Red Sea.

India's task is to avoid ideological entrapment. It must deepen strategic cooperation with Israel without becoming part of Israel's conflict with Iran. It must preserve relations with Iran without accepting Iran's anti-Israel ideological posture. It must maintain Gulf partnerships without becoming captive to Gulf rivalries. In the broader framework of Indian foreign policy, West Asia requires *balanced firmness, strategic restraint and diplomatic plurality*. India's greatest strength lies in its ability to engage all sides while protecting its own national interest.

14.3 India and Gulf Arab States

India's relations with the Gulf Arab states constitute one of the most indispensable dimensions of its West Asia policy. The Gulf is not merely an

external region for India; it is a zone of *energy security, diaspora livelihood, maritime connectivity, investment inflow, food security, strategic communication, religious travel, and commercial interdependence*. The Arabian Peninsula and the western coast of India have been linked for centuries through trade in spices, pearls, horses, dates, textiles, gold, incense and maritime commerce. Before modern diplomacy gave these relations formal shape, Indian merchants, sailors, scholars and labour communities had already woven the Arabian Sea into a shared civilizational and commercial space.

The importance of the Gulf increased dramatically after the discovery and export of oil. The Gulf Arab states became central to India's energy supply, and India became central to the Gulf's labour force, service economy, food imports, medical networks and human capital. Millions of Indians live and work in the Gulf, making the region not only a matter of foreign policy but also a matter of family income, social mobility, remittances and national welfare. This human dimension gives India–Gulf relations a depth that cannot be measured only by trade statistics.

India's engagement with the Gulf Arab states has matured from labour-and-oil diplomacy into *comprehensive strategic partnership*. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are now among India's most important partners in West Asia. Cooperation covers energy, investment, defence, counter-terrorism, infrastructure, food security, logistics, digital payments, education, space, renewable energy, maritime security, and regional connectivity. This expansion shows that India's Gulf policy has moved from dependency to partnership.

At the same time, the Gulf is deeply connected with India–Iran relations. Iran lies across the Persian Gulf from the Arab monarchies and has a long history of rivalry, competition and engagement with them. Tensions between Iran and Gulf Arab states affect energy prices, shipping lanes, Indian citizens, regional investment and Chabahar. India therefore cannot pursue Iran policy in isolation from Gulf policy. It must maintain strong relations with Gulf Arab states while preserving its strategic engagement with Iran. This is the essence of *balanced West Asian statecraft*.

The Gulf Arab states have also changed their own foreign policies. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's global economic diplomacy, Qatar's mediation role, Oman's quiet diplomacy and the growing diversification of

Gulf economies have created new opportunities for India. The Gulf is no longer only an oil market; it is becoming a region of sovereign wealth funds, logistics hubs, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, ports, tourism, education, defence modernization and strategic investments. India's rise and Gulf diversification are therefore mutually complementary.

The rise of Israel–Gulf cooperation after the Abraham Accords and the emergence of formats like I2U2 have further changed the diplomatic landscape. India can now work with Israel and some Gulf partners in areas such as food corridors, clean energy, technology, logistics and infrastructure. However, India must ensure that such cooperation does not appear as an anti-Iran bloc. India's diplomacy must remain *inclusive, issue-based and autonomy-oriented*.

In conclusion, India's relations with Gulf Arab states form a central pillar of its West Asia policy. The Gulf provides energy, remittances, investment, diaspora security and maritime relevance. India provides labour, markets, food, services, technology, medical expertise and strategic partnership. In refined geopolitical language, the Gulf is India's *western economic lifeline and diaspora heartland*, while Iran remains India's *continental corridor to Afghanistan and Central Asia*. India must protect both.

14.3.1 Saudi Arabia and UAE in India's Foreign Policy

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates occupy a privileged place in India's contemporary foreign policy. They are not simply oil suppliers or labour destinations; they are *strategic partners* with whom India engages in energy, investment, defence, security, technology, infrastructure, food security and regional diplomacy. The transformation of India's relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is one of the most significant achievements of India's modern West Asia policy.

Saudi Arabia is important because of its energy resources, Islamic-world influence, custodianship of the holy mosques, financial capacity, strategic location and growing economic modernization under Vision 2030. For India, Saudi Arabia is a major crude-oil supplier, a large host of Indian workers, an important investor, a partner in counter-terrorism, and a state whose influence in the Muslim world carries diplomatic significance. India's relations with Saudi Arabia have moved from cautious oil diplomacy to *strategic partnership with political depth*.

The India–Saudi Strategic Partnership Council has given institutional structure to the relationship. Its expansion into ministerial committees covering political, consular, security, defence, economy, energy, investment, technology, tourism and cultural cooperation reflects the breadth of engagement. India and Saudi Arabia are now discussing investment, refinery cooperation, defence cooperation, space, health, culture and logistics. This shows that the relationship is no longer confined to hydrocarbons; it has become multidimensional.

The UAE is equally vital but in a different way. It is India’s commercial gateway to the Gulf, a major investment partner, an important energy supplier, a financial hub, a logistics centre, a home to millions of Indians, and a key player in new minilateral frameworks such as I2U2 and IMEC. Dubai and Abu Dhabi have become central to Indian business, aviation, finance, education, tourism and diaspora life. India–UAE relations are therefore marked by *economic density* and *social immediacy*.

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement between India and the UAE has accelerated trade and investment. The local-currency settlement mechanism between the Indian rupee and UAE dirham further reflects the desire to reduce transactional friction and create financial innovation. These developments show that India–UAE relations are becoming instruments of *geo-economic experimentation*. The UAE’s sovereign wealth funds, ports, logistics companies and technology ambitions make it a major partner in India’s growth story.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also important for India’s food and energy security. India imports oil, gas and petroleum products from the Gulf, while Gulf countries import food, agricultural products, pharmaceuticals, medical services and skilled human resources from India. This creates mutual dependence. India needs stable energy flows; Gulf states need reliable markets and human capital. This is a relationship of *strategic complementarity*.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also central to India’s regional balancing. They maintain relations with the United States, China, Europe, Russia, Israel and Iran in different ways. Their foreign policies are becoming more autonomous and multi-directional. This suits India because India itself follows multi-alignment. India can work with Gulf Arab states without being

trapped in anti-Iran positions, just as Gulf states increasingly engage Iran pragmatically while maintaining ties with Israel and the United States.

India's defence and security cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE has grown in recent years. Joint exercises, naval visits, defence dialogues, counter-terrorism cooperation, intelligence coordination, maritime security and defence trade are becoming more visible. This development is important because the Arabian Sea and Gulf region are vital to India's energy and trade. Maritime security in this region directly affects Indian national interest.

Religious diplomacy is also significant, especially with Saudi Arabia. Millions of Indian Muslims travel for Hajj and Umrah. The smooth management of pilgrimage requires careful bilateral cooperation. This adds a cultural and religious dimension to India–Saudi relations. India's ability to maintain strong ties with Saudi Arabia while also engaging Iran shows the maturity of Indian diplomacy.

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are indispensable to India's foreign policy because they combine energy, trade, investment, diaspora, security and regional diplomacy. Saudi Arabia gives India energy depth and Islamic-world engagement; the UAE gives India commercial connectivity and investment dynamism. In elevated diplomatic vocabulary, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are India's *twin Gulf pillars of energy, capital, diaspora and strategic outreach*.

14.3.2 Indian Diaspora in the Gulf

The Indian diaspora in the Gulf is one of the strongest human foundations of India's West Asia policy. Millions of Indians live and work across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. They include professionals, engineers, doctors, teachers, nurses, businesspeople, managers, technicians, drivers, construction workers, domestic workers, service-sector employees and entrepreneurs. This diaspora is not merely a migrant community; it is a *living bridge* between India and the Gulf.

The presence of Indians in the Gulf has deep historical roots. Before the oil era, Indian traders and merchants were active in ports such as Muscat, Dubai, Bahrain and Basra. After the oil boom, labour migration expanded dramatically. Workers from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Punjab, Maharashtra and other states migrated to Gulf economies. Their earnings supported families, education,

housing, health, small businesses and local development in India. Thus, Gulf migration became a major socio-economic phenomenon.

The diaspora gives India diplomatic leverage and responsibility. Indian workers contribute to the Gulf's infrastructure, health systems, services, finance, hospitality, transport, education and technology sectors. Gulf governments generally recognize the Indian community as disciplined, skilled, law-abiding and economically useful. This positive reputation strengthens India's image. At the same time, India must protect workers from exploitation, wage disputes, contract violations, unsafe working conditions and legal vulnerabilities. Diaspora policy is therefore a form of *human security diplomacy*.

The welfare of Indian workers is a major component of India's relations with Gulf states. Indian missions in the Gulf deal with labour complaints, repatriation, legal assistance, death compensation, documentation, passport issues, shelters, helplines and community welfare funds. Systems such as eMigrate, Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana, Indian Community Welfare Fund and consular outreach reflect India's attempt to protect its overseas citizens. Foreign policy here enters the world of ordinary families.

The diaspora also influences domestic politics in India. Remittances from Gulf workers support households, education, marriages, land purchases, housing construction and local economies. States such as Kerala have long been deeply affected by Gulf migration. Gulf returnees bring money, skills, social expectations and cultural experiences back to India. Therefore, Gulf migration is not only an external phenomenon; it shapes Indian society internally.

The diaspora also serves as a cultural bridge. Indian festivals, cinema, cuisine, yoga, languages, temples, churches, gurudwaras, community associations and schools have created a visible Indian cultural presence in Gulf societies. The inauguration of Hindu temples in the UAE, Indian schools across the region, and large community gatherings demonstrate the social depth of India–Gulf relations. This soft-power dimension is extremely valuable.

Yet the diaspora also creates vulnerability. Any war in the Gulf, Iran–Israel confrontation, U.S.–Iran crisis, maritime disruption, pandemic, economic slowdown or labour-policy change can affect Indian citizens. India's evacuation operations in West Asia have repeatedly shown that diaspora

safety is a major national-security concern. Therefore, India's balanced diplomacy between Iran, Israel and Gulf states is partly designed to protect Indians living in the region.

The diaspora also strengthens India's case for regional stability. India has no interest in sectarian confrontation, bloc politics or military escalation because such instability can endanger Indian workers. Unlike external powers that may view West Asia mainly through military or ideological lenses, India views it through human livelihoods. This gives Indian diplomacy a *people-centred realism*.

In conclusion, the Indian diaspora in the Gulf is one of India's greatest diplomatic assets and responsibilities. It generates goodwill, remittances, cultural influence and economic connection, but it also requires protection and careful diplomacy. In refined language, the Gulf diaspora is India's *human corridor of influence, vulnerability and interdependence*.

14.3.3 Energy and Remittance Interests

Energy and remittance interests are the two material foundations of India's engagement with Gulf Arab states. Energy sustains India's economy; remittances sustain millions of Indian families. Together, they make the Gulf indispensable to India's national interest. Unlike many distant regions, the Gulf affects India's macroeconomy and household economy simultaneously. It influences oil prices, current-account stability, foreign-exchange inflows, employment, inflation, transport costs and social welfare.

Energy remains central because India imports a large share of its crude oil and natural gas requirements. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman have long been important suppliers. India's refineries, transport sector, petrochemical industry and household energy systems depend on stable supplies. Even as India expands renewable energy, hydrocarbons remain essential for the foreseeable future. Therefore, energy security keeps the Gulf at the centre of Indian foreign policy.

Saudi Arabia has been one of India's key crude-oil suppliers. The UAE is also an important source of crude oil, LNG and LPG. Qatar has been central to India's LNG imports. Oman and Kuwait also play meaningful roles. This diversity within the Gulf helps India reduce overdependence on any single supplier. Energy diplomacy is therefore not merely about buying oil; it is

about diversification, pricing, refinery compatibility, strategic petroleum reserves, long-term contracts and crisis resilience.

The Gulf's energy importance also explains India's interest in regional stability. War between Iran and Gulf states, Iran–Israel escalation, attacks on tankers, disruption in the Strait of Hormuz, Red Sea insecurity or sanctions shocks can increase oil prices and shipping costs. Such disruptions directly affect India's economy. Therefore, India consistently urges restraint and dialogue in West Asia. Diplomatic neutrality is not passivity; it is a tool for protecting energy security.

Remittances form the second major pillar. Indian workers in the Gulf send money to families across India. These remittances support household consumption, education, healthcare, housing, small businesses and local investment. At the national level, remittances strengthen foreign-exchange reserves and help stabilize the balance of payments. They are a quiet but powerful element of India's economic resilience.

The remittance relationship is changing. Higher-skilled migration to North America, Europe and Australia has increased the share of advanced economies in India's remittance inflows, but the Gulf remains extremely important because of the size of the Indian workforce there. The Gulf's contribution is especially visible in southern and western Indian states, but its impact is national. Even when global remittance patterns shift, Gulf migration continues to matter socially and economically.

Energy and remittances are linked through Gulf economic cycles. When oil prices are high and Gulf economies expand, employment opportunities and wages may improve. When oil prices fall or Gulf states restructure labour markets, migrant workers may face pressure. Therefore, India's remittance interests are indirectly tied to Gulf energy economics. India must monitor not only oil imports but also labour-market policies, nationalization programmes, visa reforms and skills requirements in Gulf states.

India's policy response must include skilling. As Gulf economies modernize under visions such as Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE diversification plans, demand may shift from low-skilled labour to technical, healthcare, digital, construction management, logistics, hospitality and professional skills. India must prepare its workforce accordingly. Skill verification agreements, training, certification and language preparation can increase the

competitiveness of Indian workers. This is *migration diplomacy with developmental foresight*.

Energy and remittance interests also shape India's balancing between Iran and the Gulf. Iran is important for Chabahar and Eurasian access, but Gulf Arab states are crucial for energy and diaspora. India cannot allow its Iran relations to damage Gulf ties. Similarly, India cannot allow Gulf partnerships or Israel cooperation to eliminate Iran's strategic value. The correct policy is *simultaneous preservation of multiple interests*.

In conclusion, energy and remittances are the economic spine of India–Gulf relations. Energy connects Gulf oil and gas to India's growth; remittances connect Gulf labour markets to Indian households. In elevated geopolitical language, the Gulf is India's *hydrocarbon reservoir and remittance treasury*, making regional stability a direct Indian national interest.

14.4 India's Balancing Between Iran, Israel and Gulf States

India's balancing between Iran, Israel and Gulf states is one of the most sophisticated exercises in contemporary Indian diplomacy. These actors often stand on different sides of regional rivalries. Iran and Israel are adversaries; Iran and some Gulf states have experienced serious strategic competition; Israel and some Gulf states have moved toward normalization; the United States influences Israel and Gulf security; China is expanding its economic role; and India has major interests with all sides. In this intricate environment, India cannot afford ideological alignment with any one bloc. It must practise *pragmatic, issue-based and non-bloc diplomacy*.

India's approach is rooted in national interest. Iran is important for Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy security and civilizational ties. Israel is important for defence, technology, agriculture, water, innovation and counter-terrorism. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are important for energy, diaspora, investment, trade, food security, logistics and Gulf influence. Qatar is important for LNG and diplomacy; Oman is important for maritime and strategic access; Kuwait and Bahrain are important for diaspora and energy. Each partner serves a different Indian need.

The greatest strength of India's West Asia policy is *de-hyphenation*. India does not allow its relationship with one regional actor to be mechanically tied to another. It can strengthen Israel ties while supporting Palestine; deepen

Gulf ties while engaging Iran; cooperate with the UAE in I2U2 while maintaining Chabahar with Iran; and work with Saudi Arabia while avoiding anti-Iran rhetoric. This de-hyphenated approach gives India flexibility and credibility.

Balancing also requires restraint in language. India generally avoids inflammatory rhetoric during regional crises. It calls for restraint, dialogue, diplomacy, protection of civilians and respect for international law. This language may appear cautious, but it protects Indian interests. India has citizens, ships, trade and energy flows across the region. A power with widespread stakes must speak responsibly.

India's balancing is also helped by the changing behaviour of regional actors. Gulf states themselves are no longer rigidly bloc-oriented. Saudi Arabia has engaged Iran through Chinese-facilitated diplomacy; the UAE maintains trade and contact with Iran while also engaging Israel; Qatar speaks with many sides; Oman has long practised mediation. Since regional states themselves are diversifying partnerships, India's multi-alignment fits the emerging regional mood.

However, risks remain. Iran–Israel war, Gaza crises, Red Sea attacks, Gulf tanker incidents, U.S.–Iran sanctions, or domestic political pressures can test India's balancing. During such moments, India must protect diaspora, energy, shipping, and diplomatic channels. The success of India's policy will be judged not only in normal times but in crises.

In conclusion, India's balancing between Iran, Israel and Gulf states is not indecision. It is an advanced form of *strategic composure*. India's purpose is to preserve all relationships, avoid entanglement, protect citizens, secure energy, sustain Chabahar, and expand economic partnerships. In refined language, India's West Asia policy is a *multi-axial equilibrium among adversarial partners*.

14.4.1 Pragmatic Diplomacy

Pragmatic diplomacy is the foundation of India's approach to Iran, Israel and Gulf states. Pragmatism means judging relationships by national interest, practical cooperation and long-term stability rather than ideological alignment. India's West Asia policy has gradually moved from moralistic postures and Cold War habits toward a more flexible and interest-based approach. This does not mean India has abandoned values; it means India has

learned to protect values through feasible diplomacy rather than rhetorical rigidity.

Pragmatic diplomacy allows India to cooperate with Israel in defence and technology while continuing relations with Iran. It allows India to work with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in energy and investment while maintaining support for Palestinian aspirations. It allows India to join minilateral economic frameworks without becoming part of regional military blocs. This flexibility is essential because West Asia is too complex for single-track diplomacy.

India's pragmatism is visible in its response to crises. During Iran–Israel tensions, India usually calls for restraint and de-escalation. During Israel–Palestine conflict, India expresses concern for civilians and supports a negotiated political solution while maintaining ties with Israel. During Gulf crises, India prioritizes safety of its citizens, energy flows and maritime routes. This reflects *interest-based moderation*.

Pragmatic diplomacy also means recognizing that every partner has limitations. Iran is strategically useful but sanctioned and regionally contested. Israel is technologically valuable but involved in serious regional conflicts. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are economically crucial but have their own strategic priorities. The United States is influential but not always aligned with India's Iran interests. China is a competitor but also a partner of several Gulf states. Pragmatism requires India to work within this imperfect reality.

Pragmatism also demands compartmentalization. India must separate defence cooperation with Israel from Chabahar cooperation with Iran; energy trade with Gulf states from Palestinian diplomacy; technology cooperation with the UAE from maritime security concerns; and diaspora welfare from regional ideological disputes. Compartmentalization does not mean moral indifference; it means preventing one disagreement from destroying all cooperation.

India's pragmatic diplomacy is strengthened by its civilizational credibility. India has historical ties with Arabs, Persians, Jews and the wider Islamic world. It has no colonial memory in West Asia comparable to Western powers. It has contributed labour, trade, medicine, education and culture. This

gives India a relatively benign image. Pragmatism, when combined with civilizational respect, becomes more acceptable.

Pragmatic diplomacy also helps India avoid overdependence. A rigid pro-Israel or pro-Iran position would damage other relationships. A rigid pro-Gulf position would weaken Chabahar and Iran access. India's correct position is balanced engagement. The aim is not equidistance but *equilibrium of interests*. India may cooperate more with one state in one sector and another state in another sector.

In conclusion, pragmatic diplomacy is India's most effective instrument in West Asia. It protects national interest, avoids entanglement, preserves multiple partnerships and allows India to respond to changing realities. In elevated diplomatic language, pragmatism is India's *statecraft of disciplined flexibility amid regional turbulence*.

14.4.2 Issue-Based Partnerships

Issue-based partnerships are central to India's West Asia strategy. In a region marked by rivalries, India cannot build one uniform relationship with all actors. Instead, it cooperates with each partner on specific issues where interests converge. With Israel, India focuses on defence, technology, agriculture, water, cyber security and innovation. With Iran, it focuses on Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, INSTC, civilizational ties and potential energy. With Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it focuses on energy, investment, diaspora, trade, food security, defence, logistics and infrastructure. This is *functional diplomacy*.

Issue-based partnerships allow India to avoid regional polarization. India does not need Israel and Iran to agree with each other in order to work with both. It does not need Saudi Arabia and Iran to have perfect relations in order to engage both. It does not need the United States and Iran to reconcile before pursuing Chabahar. India's relationships are not dependent on regional harmony; they are structured around Indian interests.

This approach reflects the changing nature of international relations. The world is no longer organized only around permanent alliances. Many states now cooperate in one area and compete in another. India can work with the UAE and Israel in I2U2, with Iran in Chabahar, with Saudi Arabia in energy and investment, with Qatar in LNG, and with Oman in maritime access. Each issue creates its own partnership geometry.

Issue-based partnerships also reduce diplomatic risk. If India's relationship with one partner faces difficulty, cooperation with others can continue. For example, sanctions may constrain energy trade with Iran, but Chabahar dialogue can continue. Conflict may complicate Israel–Gulf cooperation, but India–UAE trade can continue. Oil-price volatility may affect Gulf economies, but investment and technology cooperation may continue. Diversified partnerships create resilience.

India's issue-based approach also supports economic modernization. Israel provides advanced technology; the UAE provides capital and logistics; Saudi Arabia provides energy and investment; Qatar provides LNG; Iran provides connectivity; Oman provides maritime location and quiet diplomacy. Together, these relationships support India's development and strategic reach. No single country can provide all these advantages. Therefore, India must maintain a portfolio of partnerships.

This approach also supports regional stability. By talking to all sides, India can avoid being seen as a hostile actor by any major regional power. It may not become a mediator in every conflict, but it can remain a trusted interlocutor. Trust is built by not weaponizing one relationship against another. India's issue-based approach reduces suspicion and preserves access.

However, issue-based partnerships require disciplined messaging. India must clearly explain what each relationship is for. Defence cooperation with Israel is for India's security modernization; Chabahar cooperation with Iran is for connectivity; Gulf energy cooperation is for economic security; I2U2 is for development-oriented minilateralism. Without such clarity, partners may misread India's intentions.

Issue-based partnerships also require institutional mechanisms. Joint commissions, working groups, strategic dialogues, business councils, consular mechanisms, energy forums and defence committees are necessary. Relationships cannot depend only on leader-level chemistry. They must be embedded in bureaucracy, business and society. Institutionalization gives continuity.

In conclusion, issue-based partnerships are the operational method of India's West Asia diplomacy. They allow India to cooperate selectively, avoid ideological traps, diversify benefits and protect autonomy. In refined

language, issue-based partnership is India's *modular diplomacy for a fragmented regional order*.

14.4.3 Avoiding Regional Bloc Politics

Avoiding regional bloc politics is essential for India's long-term interests in West Asia. The region is full of rival camps, shifting alignments and security anxieties: Iran versus Israel, Iran versus some Gulf states, Israel–Gulf normalization, U.S.-led security networks, China's economic entry, Turkey's ambitions, Qatar's mediation, Saudi modernization, and non-state armed groups across several theatres. If India joins any regional bloc against another, it risks losing access, credibility and flexibility. Therefore, India's policy must remain *non-bloc, non-sectarian and interest-based*.

India has no interest in becoming part of an anti-Iran coalition because Iran is essential for Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia and civilizational diplomacy. India also has no interest in becoming part of an anti-Israel or anti-Gulf posture because Israel and Gulf states are essential for defence, technology, energy, investment, diaspora and trade. India must avoid being recruited into other people's conflicts. Its diplomacy should protect Indian interests, not amplify regional rivalries.

Avoiding bloc politics also protects India's diaspora. Indians live across the Gulf, including countries with different political alignments. If India appears hostile to one camp, its citizens may become vulnerable during crises. A balanced policy reassures host governments and Indian communities. Diaspora safety requires diplomatic neutrality in conflicts where India has no direct combat interest.

Energy security also requires avoidance of bloc politics. India imports energy from multiple Gulf and West Asian sources. Taking sides in regional conflicts could endanger supply stability or pricing. The Strait of Hormuz, Arabian Sea, Red Sea and Gulf shipping routes are too important for India to risk through ideological alignment. Maritime prudence demands diplomatic balance.

Avoiding bloc politics also strengthens India's image as an independent power. India seeks to be a major pole in world affairs, not a subordinate member of regional camps. Its foreign policy tradition—from non-alignment to strategic autonomy and multi-alignment—supports independent

judgement. In West Asia, this means India can work with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Oman without surrendering autonomy to any bloc.

This approach also allows India to benefit from emerging regional pragmatism. Gulf states themselves are diversifying partnerships. Saudi Arabia has engaged Iran; the UAE maintains links with multiple actors; Qatar mediates; Oman talks to all sides. If regional powers themselves are practising hedging and diversification, India should not adopt rigid bloc politics. India's non-bloc approach is consistent with regional trends.

Avoiding bloc politics does not mean avoiding partnerships. India can deepen defence ties with Israel, energy ties with Saudi Arabia, investment ties with the UAE, LNG ties with Qatar, maritime ties with Oman and connectivity ties with Iran. The point is to prevent any partnership from becoming an alliance against another regional actor. This distinction is crucial. Partnership is flexible; bloc politics is restrictive.

India should also avoid sectarian framing. West Asia's conflicts often involve Sunni–Shia narratives, Arab–Persian rivalries, Israeli–Palestinian struggles and ideological contests. India, as a plural society with a large Muslim population and civilizational links with both Arab and Persian worlds, must avoid sectarian alignment. Its policy should be guided by sovereignty, stability, development and dialogue.

In conclusion, avoiding regional bloc politics is the highest wisdom of India's West Asia diplomacy. It preserves relations with all major actors, protects diaspora, secures energy, sustains Chabahar, deepens Israel and Gulf partnerships, and maintains India's strategic autonomy. In elevated geopolitical language, India must remain a *balancing civilizational power*, not a partisan instrument of West Asian rivalries.

Concluding Observation

India's relations with Gulf Arab states and its balancing among Iran, Israel and the Gulf reveal the sophistication of contemporary Indian diplomacy. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are indispensable for energy, investment, diaspora, trade and strategic cooperation. The Indian diaspora in the Gulf is a human bridge and a national responsibility. Energy and remittances make Gulf stability a direct Indian interest. At the same time, Iran remains vital for Chabahar and continental access, while Israel remains vital for defence and technology.

India's success lies in its ability to maintain simultaneous partnerships. It does not need to choose Iran against Israel, Israel against the Gulf, or the Gulf against Iran. It must choose India's national interest through pragmatic diplomacy, issue-based partnerships and avoidance of regional bloc politics. In the wider architecture of India–Iran relations, Gulf politics does not reduce Iran's importance; it makes Indian balancing more complex. The mature Indian approach is therefore *multi-aligned, de-hyphenated, non-sectarian and strategically autonomous*.

Chapter 15:

Defence, Security and Maritime Cooperation

Defence, security and maritime cooperation constitute an important, though carefully calibrated, dimension of India–Iran relations. Unlike India’s defence relationship with Russia, Israel, France or the United States, India–Iran defence cooperation has not developed into a large military-procurement relationship. Yet it remains strategically significant because both countries share concerns regarding terrorism, extremism, Afghanistan, narcotics trafficking, maritime security, Persian Gulf stability, Indian Ocean sea lanes and the security of energy routes. Their cooperation is therefore less about conventional military alliance and more about *security consultation, regional stability, connectivity protection* and *maritime prudence*.

India and Iran are both civilizational states located at critical geopolitical junctions. India dominates the central Indian Ocean space, while Iran sits at the gateway of the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Caspian region and Central Asia. India’s security interests extend westward through the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Red Sea and East African littoral. Iran’s security interests extend eastward through Afghanistan and Pakistan, southward through the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, and northward through the Caspian and Caucasus. Their geographies do not overlap completely, but they intersect in strategically decisive spaces. This intersection creates a natural ground for security dialogue.

The maritime dimension is especially important. The Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean are connected through the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. India’s energy imports, trade routes, diaspora safety and naval deployments are directly affected by stability in these waters. Iran’s coastline, ports and naval posture influence the security environment of the same maritime space. Therefore, India–Iran security cooperation cannot be understood only through land-based concerns such as Afghanistan; it must also be viewed through the lens of *maritime geopolitics*.

In classical geopolitical thought, Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* explains why control, access and security of sea routes are central to national power. Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History* explains why continental corridors through Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia matter for India's Eurasian access. Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace* helps interpret Iran and the Indian Ocean littoral as part of the strategic rimland where maritime and continental power meet. India–Iran security cooperation lies precisely at this meeting point of *sea power* and *land connectivity*.

15.1 Security Interests of India and Iran

The security interests of India and Iran are shaped by geography, history, regional instability and the behaviour of neighbouring states. India faces terrorism, cross-border militancy, radicalization, maritime threats, China–Pakistan cooperation and energy-route vulnerability. Iran faces border militancy, sectarian extremism, sanctions pressure, narcotics trafficking, U.S. military pressure, Israel-related tensions, instability in Afghanistan and insecurity in the Persian Gulf. These threats are not identical, but they overlap sufficiently to create common ground.

Afghanistan has historically been the most important security bridge between India and Iran. During the Taliban's first rule, India and Iran shared concerns about Pakistan-backed Taliban dominance and extremist safe havens. After 2001, both supported stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan, though through different instruments. After the Taliban's return in 2021, both countries again faced the question of how to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a source of terrorism, narcotics, refugee instability and regional insecurity. Thus, Afghanistan remains a *strategic theatre of convergent anxieties*.

Pakistan also shapes India–Iran security thinking. For India, Pakistan is linked with cross-border terrorism and transit obstruction. For Iran, Pakistan is a difficult neighbour with which it shares border-security problems in the Balochistan region. Iran cannot view Pakistan entirely through India's lens because Pakistan is Iran's immediate neighbour; nevertheless, militancy, narcotics and instability in Pakistan's western region affect both Iran and India's broader regional calculations. The Pakistan factor therefore creates an indirect security connection between New Delhi and Tehran.

India and Iran also share concerns about non-state actors. Terrorist organizations, extremist networks, smugglers, narcotics traffickers, cyber actors and armed militias increasingly operate across borders. Security today is no longer only a matter of conventional armies. It is also a matter of *hybrid threats, grey-zone conflict, ideological radicalization, financial networks and transnational criminality*. India–Iran security dialogue must therefore address both traditional and non-traditional security.

The maritime domain adds another layer. India wants secure sea lanes from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and onward to Indian ports. Iran wants security along its Gulf and Gulf of Oman coastline. Instability in the Strait of Hormuz, tanker attacks, piracy, drone threats, mine warfare, sanctions-related shipping risks, and great-power naval rivalry all affect the region. Maritime security is therefore not separate from national security; it is a central part of it.

In conclusion, India and Iran share security interests in preventing terrorism, controlling extremism, stabilizing Afghanistan, securing maritime routes, combating narcotics, and preventing regional conflicts from disrupting trade and energy. In refined strategic vocabulary, their security cooperation is a *selective convergence of two civilizational states seeking stability across the Asian rimland*.

15.1.1 Terrorism

Terrorism is one of the most serious security concerns shared by India and Iran, although its specific forms differ in the two countries. India has faced cross-border terrorism, insurgent violence, attacks on civilians, attacks on security forces and internationally linked terror networks. Iran has faced attacks by extremist groups, border militants, sectarian organizations and anti-state armed actors, particularly in its south-eastern and western regions. Both countries understand that terrorism is not only a domestic crime; it is often connected with external sanctuaries, ideological radicalization, financing networks and geopolitical manipulation.

India's experience with terrorism is deeply shaped by Pakistan-based groups and the wider history of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, metropolitan attacks and cross-border infiltration. Major incidents such as the 1999 IC-814 hijacking, the 2001 Parliament attack, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the Pathankot attack, the Uri attack and the Pulwama attack strengthened

India's insistence that terrorism cannot be justified by political grievances. India's diplomatic position has consistently emphasized *zero tolerance for terrorism* and opposition to double standards.

Iran's experience with terrorism is shaped by its own regional environment. Iran has faced attacks from groups operating near its borders, including extremist organizations in Sistan and Baluchestan and threats connected with Daesh/ISIS. Iran's support for certain regional armed groups is controversial in Western and Israeli discourse, but from Tehran's own perspective, it faces serious terrorist and extremist threats from hostile non-state actors. This difference in narratives makes the topic complex, but India and Iran still share concern over groups such as Daesh/ISIS and violent extremism in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has been central to terrorism concerns for both countries. The collapse of state authority, the rise of Taliban networks, the presence of Al-Qaeda-linked actors, the emergence of Daesh/ISIS-Khorasan, narcotics-financed violence and Pakistan's role in Afghan militancy have all affected India and Iran. India fears that Afghanistan may again become a sanctuary for anti-India terrorism. Iran fears that extremist groups may threaten its border, Shia communities, diplomatic interests and regional influence. This creates a basis for dialogue.

India and Iran have repeatedly emphasized the need to oppose terrorism without double standards. This principle is important because some states have historically distinguished between "good" and "bad" militants according to strategic convenience. India strongly rejects such distinctions. Iran, too, has often criticized selective counter-terrorism approaches. A credible India–Iran counter-terrorism dialogue must therefore focus on common threats, intelligence assessment, financial tracking, border insecurity and Afghanistan-related risks.

Terrorism also affects connectivity. Chabahar, INSTC, Afghanistan routes and Central Asian access cannot succeed if the surrounding region is insecure. Terrorist attacks create fear among investors, traders, transporters and insurers. Thus, counter-terrorism is not only a security policy; it is also a connectivity policy. A corridor is only as strong as the security environment through which it passes.

India–Iran cooperation against terrorism must remain practical rather than rhetorical. It can include security consultations, information exchange, assessment of Daesh/ISIS-K threats, narcotics-terror links, radicalization monitoring, Afghan stability consultations and maritime-security intelligence where appropriate. The aim is not to create a formal military alliance, but to build *strategic awareness* and *preventive coordination*.

In conclusion, terrorism remains a major area of shared concern between India and Iran. Their experiences differ, but their interests converge in opposing extremist violence, preventing Afghan instability, and protecting regional connectivity. In elevated security language, terrorism is the *asymmetric menace that converts weak borders and ideological militancy into strategic instability*.

15.1.2 Extremism

Extremism is broader than terrorism. While terrorism refers to organized violence for political or ideological purposes, extremism refers to the radical ideas, social networks, sectarian mobilization and ideological conditioning that may produce violence. India and Iran both have an interest in preventing extremist ideologies from destabilizing plural societies, border regions and regional states. The danger of extremism lies in its capacity to turn communities into instruments of geopolitical conflict.

India is a plural, democratic and civilizational diverse society. Its security depends upon preserving social harmony while countering radicalization. India faces threats from religious extremism, separatist extremism, online radicalization, transnational jihadist propaganda and ideological polarization. Its counter-extremism approach must therefore combine security measures with education, social inclusion, constitutional values and community confidence. Extremism cannot be defeated only by force; it must also be defeated by *social resilience*.

Iran's concerns regarding extremism are shaped by sectarian and border dynamics. As a Shia-majority state in a region containing Sunni extremist networks, Iran fears sectarian militant groups, Daesh/ISIS ideology, anti-Shia violence and radical movements near its borders. Iran also worries about extremist spillover from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria. Its experience shows how extremist ideology can use weak states, civil wars and borderlands to expand influence.

Afghanistan again lies at the centre of India–Iran concerns. Extremist groups can exploit poverty, weak governance, ideological schooling, narcotics networks and external patronage. After the Taliban’s return, both India and Iran have watched carefully whether Afghan territory will be used by transnational extremist organizations. Daesh/ISIS-K is particularly dangerous because it opposes the Taliban, targets Shia communities, threatens foreign missions and seeks regional expansion.

Extremism is also linked with sectarian politics. West Asia has repeatedly witnessed conflicts framed in Sunni–Shia terms, though their causes are often political and strategic as much as religious. India must avoid sectarian alignment because of its own plural society and large Muslim population. Iran also seeks to protect Shia communities but must avoid policies that intensify sectarian polarization. India–Iran dialogue should therefore emphasize anti-extremism without sectarian language.

Online extremism is a newer challenge. Digital platforms, encrypted communication, propaganda videos, online recruitment, cryptocurrency financing and transnational ideological communities make extremism more mobile. India and Iran both need cyber-awareness and digital monitoring to address radicalization. Counter-extremism in the twenty-first century is as much about *information space* as physical territory.

Extremism also threatens maritime and trade security. Radical groups in Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan or Pakistan can indirectly affect shipping routes, port operations, pipelines, trade corridors and insurance costs. The Red Sea crisis showed how non-state actors can disrupt global shipping. India and Iran must therefore see extremism as a threat to economic security, not only political security.

Counter-extremism requires long-term cooperation in education, culture, inter-civilizational dialogue, media responsibility, youth engagement, deradicalization, religious moderation and border development. India and Iran, as ancient civilizations with deep philosophical and literary traditions, can contribute to a discourse against violent radicalism. Persian, Sanskrit, Sufi, Bhakti and plural civilizational legacies can be invoked to oppose extremist simplifications of identity.

In conclusion, extremism is a deeper ideological soil from which terrorism may grow. India and Iran must address it through security, education,

development, digital vigilance and cultural confidence. In refined language, extremism is the *intellectual insurgency that precedes physical violence*, and countering it requires both state capacity and civilizational wisdom.

15.1.3 Maritime Security

Maritime security is one of the most important areas where India and Iran's interests intersect. India's economy depends heavily on sea-borne trade and energy imports. Iran's strategic identity is deeply connected with the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. The waters between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean are therefore a common security space. For both countries, maritime insecurity can affect energy, trade, ports, insurance, diaspora welfare and regional stability.

India's maritime security concerns include piracy, terrorism at sea, illegal fishing, smuggling, narcotics trafficking, arms movement, human trafficking, attacks on merchant vessels, maritime cyber threats, grey-zone operations, and the naval presence of extra-regional powers. The Indian Navy has increasingly operated as a *net security provider* in the Indian Ocean Region by conducting anti-piracy patrols, evacuations, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and maritime surveillance. These activities strengthen India's reputation as a responsible maritime power.

Iran's maritime security concerns are shaped by its position in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Iran views the Gulf as its strategic neighbourhood and often objects to the presence of foreign military forces near its coast. It also seeks to protect its oil exports, ports, islands, naval facilities and maritime approaches. Iran's naval posture includes both conventional naval assets and asymmetric capabilities. This makes Gulf maritime security complex because deterrence, suspicion and escalation risk coexist.

For India, Iran's maritime position is unavoidable. The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most important energy chokepoints, and Indian crude oil and LNG supplies from the Gulf depend on secure passage through or near this route. Any conflict involving Iran, the United States, Israel or Gulf states can disrupt energy flows and increase insurance costs. India therefore has a direct interest in preventing maritime escalation around Iran.

Chabahar adds a positive dimension to maritime cooperation. Located on Iran's Gulf of Oman coast, outside the inner Persian Gulf, Chabahar gives

India a port-based connection to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The security of Chabahar and its maritime approaches is therefore important for India. Maritime cooperation around port safety, shipping procedures, seafarer certification, cargo movement and emergency coordination can support the port's effectiveness.

Maritime security also includes counter-narcotics. The Arabian Sea has seen movement of drugs, weapons and illicit cargo. Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the western Indian Ocean are connected through trafficking routes. India's Navy and Coast Guard have intercepted narcotics shipments in the Arabian Sea. Iran also fights narcotics trafficking through land and maritime routes. Cooperation in awareness and information sharing can reduce criminal flows.

The Indian Ocean is increasingly crowded with naval forces. The United States, China, European powers, Russia, Gulf navies, Pakistan, Iran and India all operate in different parts of the region. This creates both security and risk. Naval presence can deter piracy and protect shipping, but it can also create competition and incidents. India and Iran must understand each other's maritime concerns to avoid misperception.

India's maritime doctrine emphasizes secure sea lanes, freedom of navigation, regional cooperation and maritime domain awareness. Iran emphasizes sovereignty, Gulf security and resistance to external pressure. These approaches are not identical, but they can coexist if both sides focus on common interests: safe shipping, anti-piracy, counter-narcotics, port safety and crisis communication. Practical cooperation is more realistic than formal naval alignment.

In conclusion, maritime security is a vital dimension of India–Iran relations because the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean form a connected strategic space. India needs safe sea lanes; Iran controls critical maritime geography. In elevated geopolitical language, maritime security is the *blue-water bridge between India's energy dependence and Iran's chokepoint geography*.

15.2 Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean Security

Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean security are inseparable for India. The Persian Gulf supplies energy; the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea connect that energy to India; the Indian Ocean carries it to Indian ports and onward to East Asia.

Iran, located at the northern side of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, is central to this security architecture. Therefore, India–Iran relations must be understood through the maritime continuum stretching from the Gulf to the Indian Ocean.

The Persian Gulf is one of the most militarized and economically important maritime regions in the world. It contains major oil and gas producers, shipping terminals, offshore energy infrastructure, naval bases, tanker routes and strategic chokepoints. It is also affected by U.S.–Iran hostility, Iran–Israel rivalry, Gulf Arab security concerns, sanctions, drone warfare, missile threats and maritime incidents. Security in this region is therefore fragile and highly consequential.

The Indian Ocean, by contrast, is a vast maritime theatre connecting Africa, West Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Australia. It carries energy, containers, food, raw materials and manufactured goods. For India, the Indian Ocean is not a distant sea; it is the central theatre of national security. India's peninsula projects into the ocean, giving it both opportunity and responsibility. The security of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean therefore forms one strategic equation for New Delhi.

India and Iran view this equation from different angles. India emphasizes sea-lane security, energy stability, anti-piracy, maritime domain awareness and freedom of navigation. Iran emphasizes Gulf sovereignty, resistance to foreign military pressure, protection of its coastline and deterrence against adversaries. These perspectives sometimes differ, but both countries benefit from avoiding disruption. War in the Gulf harms Iran, India and the global economy alike.

15.2.1 Oil Route Security

Oil route security is one of the most critical concerns connecting India, Iran, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. India's economic growth depends upon reliable energy imports. A large share of India's crude oil and LNG supplies comes from West Asia and passes through maritime routes near the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea. If these routes are disrupted, India faces higher prices, inflationary pressure, refinery complications, shipping delays and broader economic stress. Oil route security is therefore a matter of *national economic security*.

The Strait of Hormuz is the central chokepoint in this system. It connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Major oil and LNG exporters such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar and Iran depend on routes connected to this waterway. Any disruption in Hormuz immediately affects global energy markets. For India, the risk is not theoretical. Regional conflict, sanctions, tanker attacks, mine threats, drone attacks or naval confrontation can quickly affect energy costs.

Iran's location gives it major influence over the security psychology of the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has at times threatened to close or disrupt the strait in response to external pressure. Even when actual closure is unlikely or temporary, the threat itself can raise insurance premiums, shipping costs and oil prices. Thus, oil route security depends not only on physical flow but also on perception, confidence and deterrence. Maritime markets react to fear.

India's oil route security strategy must therefore include diversification. Diversification means multiple suppliers, multiple routes, strategic petroleum reserves, refinery flexibility, alternative fuels, renewable energy, LNG contracts, and diplomatic engagement with all Gulf actors. India cannot control Hormuz, but it can reduce vulnerability. Strategic energy policy must combine *maritime security* with *supply resilience*.

India's Navy plays an important role in oil route security. While India does not seek to militarize the Gulf, it maintains naval presence in the Arabian Sea and western Indian Ocean, conducts anti-piracy operations, escorts vessels when required, and monitors maritime threats. This helps protect Indian-flagged and India-bound shipping. Naval diplomacy with Gulf countries, Oman, Iran and other littoral states supports confidence.

Iran also has an interest in oil route security because its own economy depends on energy exports and maritime trade. However, Iran's conflict with the United States, Israel and some regional actors creates contradictions. Tehran wants secure routes under normal conditions but may use maritime pressure as deterrence during crises. This duality makes Iran a central but complicated actor in oil route security.

Oil route security also includes LNG. Qatar is a major LNG supplier to India, and LNG shipping through Gulf-related routes is vital. Disruption affects not only transport fuel but also power, fertilizer, industry and city gas distribution.

Energy security in the modern economy is broad and interconnected. Therefore, Persian Gulf security affects India's entire development trajectory.

In conclusion, oil route security is the most material maritime interest linking India with the Persian Gulf. Iran's geography, Gulf stability and Indian naval preparedness all matter. In refined language, oil route security is the *hydrocarbon artery through which West Asian energy sustains India's economic body*.

15.2.2 Sea Lines of Communication

Sea Lines of Communication, commonly known as SLOCs, are the maritime routes through which energy, trade, food, raw materials, military logistics and commercial goods move across oceans. For India, SLOCs are lifelines. The Persian Gulf–Gulf of Oman–Arabian Sea–Indian Ocean route is especially important because it carries energy from West Asia to India and beyond. If SLOCs are insecure, national economies suffer. Therefore, SLOC security is a central concern of Indian maritime strategy.

The Indian Ocean contains several critical chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, Suez Canal, Strait of Malacca, Mozambique Channel and Cape of Good Hope routes. India's location near the centre of the Indian Ocean gives it a natural role in monitoring and securing these routes. India's western seaboard faces the Arabian Sea, making the Gulf route especially significant. The security of ships moving from Hormuz toward Mumbai, Kandla, Mundra, Kochi and other ports directly affects India's economy.

SLOCs are vulnerable to many threats. These include piracy, terrorism, war, mines, drone attacks, missile threats, maritime militia, cyber attacks on port systems, sanctions-related shipping disruptions, illegal trafficking, and great-power confrontation. The Red Sea crisis and Gulf tanker incidents have shown that non-state actors and regional conflicts can disrupt global shipping. SLOC security is therefore no longer only about naval fleets; it is about *multi-domain maritime resilience*.

India's naval strategy increasingly emphasizes maritime domain awareness, mission-based deployments, anti-piracy patrols, information-sharing, coastal security, island infrastructure and partnerships with littoral states. The Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region and naval deployments help India monitor developments across the region. This supports not only Indian

shipping but also wider regional security. India's role as a net security provider depends on such capabilities.

Iran's role in SLOC security is linked with its coastline and influence near the Strait of Hormuz. Iran can either contribute to stability through predictable behaviour and coordination or contribute to uncertainty through confrontation and maritime pressure. India's diplomacy with Iran should encourage the former. India has no interest in any escalation that closes or disrupts SLOCs. Dialogue with Tehran is therefore part of India's maritime risk management.

SLOC security also supports Chabahar. Cargo moving to Chabahar must pass through maritime routes across the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman. If these routes are insecure, Chabahar's commercial attractiveness suffers. Therefore, India's Chabahar strategy is not only a port policy; it is a SLOC policy. Maritime safety enables continental access.

Sea lines also have a legal dimension. Freedom of navigation, international law, UNCLOS principles, anti-piracy cooperation and search-and-rescue coordination all contribute to maritime order. India generally supports rule-based maritime conduct because predictable rules help trading states. Iran, while sometimes critical of Western naval presence, also benefits from lawful and secure navigation when its trade is not restricted. This creates limited but real common ground.

In conclusion, SLOCs are the arteries of India's external trade and energy security. The Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean SLOCs make Iran strategically relevant to India's maritime policy. In elevated geopolitical vocabulary, SLOC security is the *oceanic infrastructure of India's prosperity and strategic autonomy*.

15.2.3 Naval Presence of Major Powers

The naval presence of major powers in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean is a defining feature of regional security. The United States, China, India, European navies, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and Gulf states all operate in different capacities across these waters. Their presence is justified in terms of energy security, anti-piracy, counter-terrorism, freedom of navigation, deterrence, crisis response and protection of commercial shipping. Yet the same presence can also generate suspicion, rivalry and escalation. The region is therefore a theatre of *crowded maritime geopolitics*.

The United States has long been the dominant external naval power in the Persian Gulf. Its military presence has been linked to energy security, protection of Gulf allies, deterrence of Iran, counter-terrorism and freedom of navigation. U.S. bases, carrier groups, patrols and maritime coalitions give Washington significant influence over Gulf security. Iran, however, views this presence as threatening and illegitimate. The U.S.–Iran naval rivalry is one of the most dangerous features of Gulf security.

China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean has grown gradually. Since 2008, China has conducted anti-piracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden, and its base in Djibouti gives it a permanent support facility in the western Indian Ocean. China's commercial port interests, BRI projects, Gwadar involvement and increasing blue-water capability have raised Indian concerns. China does not yet dominate the Indian Ocean, but its presence is expanding. India must monitor this carefully.

India's naval presence is rooted in geography and responsibility. India is the largest resident naval power in the central Indian Ocean. Its Navy protects Indian interests, conducts surveillance, responds to piracy, supports humanitarian assistance, evacuates citizens, and cooperates with regional partners. India's mission-based deployments show its desire to maintain sustained presence across important maritime zones. This gives India credibility as a *resident maritime security provider*.

Iran's naval presence is concentrated in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman and nearby seas. Iran's regular navy and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy have different operational cultures and roles. Iran uses asymmetric maritime capabilities such as fast boats, missiles, drones, mines and coastal defence systems to offset stronger naval powers. This creates deterrence but also raises escalation risks. Incidents involving vessels can quickly become international crises.

Pakistan's naval role is also relevant because of Gwadar, China–Pakistan cooperation and the Arabian Sea. Pakistan's naval modernization and China's involvement at Gwadar create concern for India. If Chinese naval access to Pakistani facilities deepens, India's western maritime environment becomes more complicated. Chabahar and India's relations with Iran must be understood partly in this maritime balance.

European navies also operate in the region, especially for anti-piracy, Red Sea security, Gulf protection and maritime coalitions. France, the United Kingdom and European Union missions have interests in securing shipping routes. Their presence adds to the crowded maritime environment but can also contribute to stability when coordinated.

The naval presence of major powers has both positive and negative effects. Positively, it can deter piracy, protect shipping, respond to crises and maintain open sea lanes. Negatively, it can intensify rivalry, provoke incidents and militarize disputes. The challenge is to maintain security without triggering confrontation. This requires communication, confidence-building, rules of engagement and crisis-management mechanisms.

For India–Iran relations, the naval presence of major powers creates a need for careful dialogue. India cooperates with the United States and other partners but also values Iran. Iran opposes U.S. military dominance but needs secure sea lanes. India must therefore reassure Iran that Indian maritime activity is not anti-Iranian, while also preserving cooperation with the United States and Gulf partners. This is *maritime multi-alignment*.

In conclusion, the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean are crowded by major-power naval presence. The United States protects its Gulf order; China expands its Indian Ocean footprint; India asserts resident maritime responsibility; Iran defends its Gulf position; Pakistan links with China; and European navies protect trade routes. In refined language, the region has become a *naval chessboard where energy, corridors, chokepoints and great-power rivalry converge*.

Concluding Observation

Defence, security and maritime cooperation between India and Iran is not an alliance, but it is strategically meaningful. Both countries share concerns regarding terrorism, extremism, Afghanistan, narcotics, maritime security and the stability of routes linking the Persian Gulf with the Indian Ocean. India's security interests require safe energy flows, secure sea lines, Chabahar access and regional stability. Iran's security interests require border stability, Gulf security, deterrence, transit relevance and protection of its maritime approaches.

The Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean form one interconnected security theatre. Oil routes, SLOCs, chokepoints and naval deployments make this region

central to India's rise and Iran's strategic posture. India must cooperate with the United States, Gulf states and other partners while maintaining dialogue with Iran. Iran must preserve its security without destabilizing routes on which regional economies depend. In the broader framework of India–Iran relations, maritime security is the *strategic waterway through which energy, diplomacy and regional stability flow together*.

15.3 Possibilities of Defence Cooperation

The possibilities of defence cooperation between India and Iran must be understood with precision and restraint. India and Iran are not formal military allies, nor is their defence relationship comparable to India's defence partnerships with Russia, France, Israel or the United States. Yet the two countries possess several areas of meaningful security convergence. These include maritime dialogue, counter-terrorism consultation, Afghanistan-related security assessment, narcotics control, port security, protection of sea lanes, regional crisis management, and strategic communication between security establishments. Therefore, India–Iran defence cooperation is best described as *selective security convergence*, not *military alliance*.

The future of India–Iran defence cooperation lies less in arms transfer and more in *strategic consultation*. Both countries occupy sensitive geopolitical positions. India stands at the centre of the Indian Ocean and faces a difficult security environment involving Pakistan, China, terrorism, maritime competition and energy-route vulnerability. Iran lies near the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Caspian region and Central Asia. This makes Iran a state of high strategic relevance. The intersection of these geographies gives India and Iran a natural reason to talk, coordinate and assess threats.

The most realistic areas of cooperation include naval dialogue, information exchange on maritime risks, consultation on terrorism and extremism, Afghanistan-related security discussions, and crisis communication concerning the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. Cooperation can also include training exchanges, port visits, coast-guard-level interaction, seafarer-related maritime coordination, disaster response, search and rescue, anti-piracy awareness and counter-narcotics dialogue. These are practical fields that do not necessarily violate India's broader balancing policy.

India and Iran also share an interest in protecting Chabahar. The port is not merely an economic project; it is a *strategic access platform*. Its security depends on maritime safety, hinterland stability, customs coordination, road and rail protection, and political continuity. Defence and security cooperation can therefore support Chabahar indirectly through port-security dialogue, maritime-domain awareness, logistical coordination and regional threat assessment.

Afghanistan remains another area where India–Iran security consultation is possible. Both countries do not want Afghanistan to become a sanctuary for transnational terrorism, narcotics trafficking, anti-state militancy or extremist ideological export. India's concern is anti-India terrorism and Pakistan-backed strategic depth; Iran's concern is border security, refugees, Shia communities, water, narcotics and militant spillover. These concerns are not identical, but they overlap. Therefore, Afghanistan can remain a *security bridge* between New Delhi and Tehran.

However, defence cooperation must remain carefully calibrated. India's expanding defence ties with the United States, Israel, France and Gulf countries create sensitivities in Tehran. Iran's ties with China, Pakistan and anti-Israel regional actors create sensitivities in New Delhi. Therefore, India–Iran defence cooperation should avoid provocative military symbolism and focus instead on functional areas of common interest. This is the logic of *low-visibility, high-utility cooperation*.

In conclusion, the possibilities of India–Iran defence cooperation are real but limited by regional politics. The most promising path is not a dramatic military partnership but a steady security dialogue focused on maritime safety, terrorism, extremism, Afghanistan, Chabahar and regional stability. In refined strategic language, India–Iran defence cooperation should be a *measured architecture of consultation, not an ostentatious alliance of confrontation*.

15.3.1 Naval Dialogue

Naval dialogue is one of the most important possibilities in India–Iran security cooperation. India and Iran are maritime neighbours in the larger strategic sense, because the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean form one connected maritime continuum. India's energy imports and trade routes pass through or near waters influenced by Iran's

geography. Iran's ports and naval posture affect the security environment of the Gulf of Oman and the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, regular naval dialogue between the two countries is both logical and necessary.

The objective of naval dialogue should not be military alignment against any third country. India cannot join Iran in an anti-American or anti-Israeli maritime posture, and Iran cannot be expected to align with India against China or Pakistan. The purpose should instead be *maritime confidence-building*. This can include exchange of views on piracy, maritime terrorism, narcotics trafficking, illegal arms movement, search and rescue, seafarer safety, port security, environmental disasters, tanker incidents, and crisis communication.

India's Navy has developed strong experience in the Indian Ocean through anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance, evacuation missions, mission-based deployments and maritime domain awareness. Iran has deep operational familiarity with the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. A dialogue between the Indian Navy and Iranian naval authorities can therefore create useful understanding of each other's maritime concerns. It can reduce misperception and support safer navigation.

Chabahar provides a specific practical context for naval and maritime dialogue. As India develops and operates facilities at the Shahid Beheshti Terminal, the safety of cargo, ships, crew, logistics operators and port infrastructure becomes important. A port that links maritime India with continental Afghanistan and Central Asia must be secure. Naval dialogue can help in assessing risks around the Gulf of Oman, coordinating with port authorities, and ensuring that Chabahar remains a reliable corridor.

Naval dialogue may also include coast-guard-type cooperation. Many maritime threats are not purely military. Smuggling, narcotics trafficking, illegal fishing, human trafficking, marine pollution, accidental collisions and distress at sea require law-enforcement and humanitarian responses. India and Iran can exchange best practices without creating a formal naval alliance. Such cooperation is diplomatically safer and operationally useful.

The Arabian Sea has become an increasingly contested maritime zone. China's presence through Pakistan's Gwadar, U.S. naval presence in the Gulf, European naval deployments, Iranian naval activity, Gulf state navies and

India's own maritime operations have created a crowded strategic environment. In such a space, communication is essential. Naval dialogue can act as a *maritime safety valve* preventing misreading of intentions.

India must, however, conduct naval dialogue with sensitivity. Too visible a naval alignment with Iran may worry the United States, Israel and Gulf partners. Too limited a maritime relationship may disappoint Iran and weaken Chabahar security. The correct policy is therefore *calibrated maritime engagement*. India should focus on professional dialogue, port-related coordination and non-traditional maritime security rather than dramatic exercises that may attract geopolitical controversy.

Iran also has to manage its own concerns. Tehran is suspicious of foreign naval presence in the Gulf and may view India's close naval cooperation with the United States and Gulf states with caution. India must reassure Iran that Indian naval activity is designed to protect trade, energy and Indian citizens, not to encircle Iran. Trust requires repeated conversation.

In conclusion, naval dialogue is a realistic and valuable area for India–Iran cooperation. It can strengthen maritime confidence, support Chabahar, improve crisis communication and address non-traditional threats. In elevated diplomatic vocabulary, naval dialogue is the *blue-water channel through which India and Iran can convert maritime proximity into strategic understanding*.

15.3.2 Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

Counter-terrorism cooperation is another major possibility in India–Iran security relations. India and Iran have both suffered from terrorism and extremist violence, though in different forms and contexts. India's experience is shaped by cross-border terrorism, Pakistan-based militant groups, attacks on civilians and security forces, and threats from transnational jihadist networks. Iran's experience is shaped by Daesh/ISIS, border militancy, sectarian attacks, anti-state armed groups and violence in Sistan and Baluchestan and other vulnerable regions. These experiences create a basis for dialogue.

Afghanistan is the most important connecting point in India–Iran counter-terrorism concerns. Both countries fear that Afghan territory may be used by extremist groups, transnational jihadist networks or narcotics-linked armed actors. India worries about anti-India groups receiving sanctuary or

ideological support. Iran worries about Daesh/ISIS-Khorasan, anti-Shia violence, border spillover, refugees and narcotics. These concerns make Afghanistan a *common security theatre*.

Counter-terrorism cooperation can include periodic assessments of terrorist networks, exchange of threat perceptions, discussion of Daesh/ISIS-K activity, monitoring of narcotics-terror linkages, and consultation on Afghanistan-related developments. Such cooperation need not involve sensitive operational intelligence at the deepest level; even structured strategic assessment can be useful. States often begin cooperation through *threat perception alignment* before moving toward deeper coordination.

India and Iran can also cooperate in multilateral forums where terrorism is discussed. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, United Nations mechanisms, regional consultations and Afghanistan-related formats can provide platforms. Iran's membership in the SCO and India's participation in the same organization create additional opportunities for dialogue on terrorism, extremism and regional security. Multilateral settings reduce bilateral political risk.

The narcotics-terrorism connection is particularly important. Afghanistan's drug economy has historically financed criminal networks, armed groups and corruption. Iran has suffered heavily from narcotics trafficking, while India has seen narcotics flows through maritime and land routes. Counter-terrorism cooperation should therefore include counter-narcotics awareness. The border between terrorism and organized crime is increasingly porous. This is the realm of *narco-security geopolitics*.

Cyber radicalization is another area of potential discussion. Terrorist organizations use online platforms for recruitment, propaganda, fundraising, ideological indoctrination and encrypted coordination. India and Iran can exchange views on digital radicalization trends, though they may differ in domestic cyber-governance models. A limited dialogue on online extremism and terrorist propaganda may still be valuable.

Counter-terrorism cooperation must be framed carefully because Iran's regional relationships with groups hostile to Israel and the United States are controversial. India cannot endorse all of Iran's regional security narratives. India's cooperation with Iran must focus on universally recognized terrorist threats such as Daesh/ISIS, transnational extremist networks, anti-India

terrorism, narcotics-financed militancy and threats to Afghanistan's stability. This protects India's credibility.

India must also ensure that counter-terrorism cooperation with Iran does not damage its ties with Israel, the United States or Gulf partners. The solution is issue-based cooperation. India can cooperate with Iran against Daesh/ISIS-type threats while cooperating with Israel on homeland security and with Gulf states on counter-radicalization and intelligence. This is *multi-vector counter-terrorism diplomacy*.

In conclusion, India–Iran counter-terrorism cooperation is possible and desirable, especially regarding Afghanistan, Daesh/ISIS-K, narcotics networks and extremist radicalization. It should be practical, selective and legally careful. In refined security language, counter-terrorism cooperation is the *hard-security corridor through which India and Iran can jointly resist the destabilizing forces of militant transnationalism*.

15.3.3 Intelligence and Security Consultation

Intelligence and security consultation is a sensitive but important possibility in India–Iran relations. In modern international politics, security cooperation does not always require formal alliances or public military exercises. Sometimes the most valuable cooperation occurs through quiet consultations among national security councils, intelligence agencies, foreign ministries, defence officials and maritime authorities. India and Iran already possess mechanisms for security dialogue, and these can be strengthened carefully.

The purpose of intelligence and security consultation should be strategic awareness, not operational entanglement. India and Iran can exchange assessments on Afghanistan, terrorism, extremism, narcotics routes, maritime risks, regional military tensions, border instability and major-power naval presence. Such consultations help each side understand the other's concerns and prevent misperceptions. In sensitive regions, misunderstanding can be as dangerous as hostility.

Afghanistan remains the central subject for such consultations. India needs information and assessment regarding Taliban behaviour, anti-India terror networks, humanitarian conditions, regional projects and Pakistan's influence. Iran needs assessment regarding border threats, refugee flows, Shia communities, water disputes, Daesh/ISIS-K and narcotics. Regular

consultation can improve policy coordination without requiring identical positions.

Security consultation can also support Chabahar. The port's success depends on stability in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province, Afghanistan's western routes, maritime approaches and regional trade networks. India and Iran can discuss threats to port operations, cargo safety, smuggling, organized crime and transit security. Chabahar is a civilian-commercial project, but its environment is security-sensitive. Therefore, consultation is necessary.

Maritime intelligence is another area where limited cooperation may be useful. This need not involve highly classified naval intelligence. It may include sharing assessments on piracy patterns, suspicious shipping, narcotics trafficking, vessel safety, regional maritime incidents and crisis alerts. The aim is to protect trade and avoid misunderstandings in the Arabian Sea–Gulf of Oman region.

India and Iran can also develop academic and think-tank-level security dialogues. Strategic communities often prepare the intellectual ground for official policy. Conferences, closed-door dialogues, maritime seminars, counter-terrorism workshops and Afghanistan roundtables can help both sides understand evolving threats. Such *Track 1.5 and Track 2 security diplomacy* is especially valuable when formal defence cooperation is constrained.

However, intelligence cooperation has limitations. India has deep intelligence and security cooperation with countries that are rivals of Iran, including the United States and Israel. Iran has security relationships with actors that India watches carefully, including China and Pakistan. Therefore, both sides will be cautious in sharing sensitive information. Trust will have limits. The aim should not be unrealistic intimacy, but reliable channels for specific issues.

India must also be careful that security consultation with Iran does not create suspicion among its other partners. The language should emphasize counter-terrorism, maritime security, Afghanistan stability and Chabahar protection. Similarly, Iran must understand that India's security ties with Israel and the United States do not mean hostility toward Iran. Diplomatic clarity is essential.

In conclusion, intelligence and security consultation between India and Iran is possible if kept focused, discreet and issue-specific. It can help both

countries manage terrorism, Afghanistan, maritime threats and regional instability. In elevated vocabulary, intelligence consultation is the *quiet strategic grammar through which states convert uncertainty into informed caution*.

15.4 Limitations of Defence Cooperation

The limitations of India–Iran defence cooperation are as important as its possibilities. Although India and Iran share several security interests, their defence relationship is constrained by sanctions, India’s relations with Iran’s rivals, Iran’s relations with China and Pakistan, regional conflicts, financial restrictions, military-technology barriers, and strategic mistrust among external powers. These limitations prevent the relationship from becoming a full defence partnership.

The first limitation is the international sanctions environment surrounding Iran. U.S. sanctions and secondary-sanctions risks discourage defence transactions, banking channels, insurance, shipping, technology transfer and institutional cooperation. Defence cooperation is especially sensitive because many Iranian military-linked entities are sanctioned. India cannot risk its larger strategic and technological relationship with the United States by engaging in activities that trigger penalties. This makes large-scale defence cooperation extremely difficult.

The second limitation is India’s own network of partnerships. India has close defence ties with Israel, expanding defence and technology cooperation with the United States, strategic partnerships with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, long-standing defence relations with Russia, and growing maritime cooperation with France and other Indo-Pacific partners. Iran may view some of these ties with suspicion, especially India’s close relationship with Israel and the United States. India must therefore keep Iran defence cooperation modest and non-provocative.

The third limitation is Iran’s relations with China and Pakistan. China is India’s principal long-term strategic competitor, and Pakistan is India’s immediate adversarial neighbour. Iran cannot ignore China because China is a major economic partner and oil buyer. Iran cannot ignore Pakistan because they share a border. Yet India must assess whether Iran’s China and Pakistan relationships could expose Indian interests, especially in security-sensitive areas. This limits the depth of defence cooperation.

The fourth limitation is strategic asymmetry. India and Iran do not have identical threat perceptions. India is focused on China, Pakistan, Indo-Pacific maritime security, terrorism, and continental access. Iran is focused on U.S. pressure, Israel, Gulf rivals, sanctions, internal security, border militancy and regime security. There is overlap, but not identity. Defence cooperation grows best when threat perceptions are strongly aligned. In the India–Iran case, they are partially aligned.

The fifth limitation is operational practicality. India’s defence systems are integrated with Russian, Western, Israeli and indigenous platforms. Iran’s defence systems are shaped by sanctions, indigenous production, Russian influence, asymmetric doctrines and IRGC-related structures. Interoperability is limited. Joint military exercises, procurement or technology cooperation would therefore face technical and political complications.

The sixth limitation is regional perception. If India–Iran defence cooperation becomes too visible, Gulf states and Israel may interpret it negatively. If India avoids Iran completely, Tehran may suspect India of surrendering to Western pressure. India must therefore manage perception through careful design of cooperation. This is why maritime safety, counter-terrorism dialogue and Chabahar-related security are safer than weapons cooperation or high-profile military exercises.

In conclusion, the limitations of India–Iran defence cooperation are structural and serious. The relationship can grow in security consultation, maritime dialogue and counter-terrorism cooperation, but it is unlikely to become a conventional defence alliance. In refined strategic language, India–Iran defence cooperation must operate within a *narrow corridor between shared interests and external constraints*.

15.4.1 U.S. Sanctions

U.S. sanctions are the most important limitation on India–Iran defence cooperation. The United States has imposed extensive sanctions on Iran’s military, financial, energy, shipping and technology sectors. Many entities connected with Iran’s defence establishment, Revolutionary Guard networks and strategic industries are sanctioned. Secondary sanctions threaten non-U.S. entities that engage in certain forms of business with sanctioned Iranian sectors. This creates a powerful deterrent.

For India, the sanctions problem is not abstract. India has a deep and growing strategic partnership with the United States, including defence cooperation, technology access, maritime cooperation, intelligence exchanges and Indo-Pacific coordination. India cannot ignore the risk that defence engagement with Iran might create friction with Washington or endanger Indian entities. Therefore, sanctions act as a *financial and diplomatic firewall* around Iran's defence sector.

Sanctions also create banking and payment problems. Even if India and Iran wanted to expand defence-related cooperation in training, equipment, technology or maintenance, payments would be difficult. Banks avoid Iran-related transactions because of compliance risk. Insurance and shipping become complicated. Companies fear reputational exposure. This makes practical cooperation slow and uncertain.

The sanctions environment also affects Chabahar indirectly. Although Chabahar has been treated at times as a special connectivity and humanitarian project, U.S. policy changes have created uncertainty. If even a civilian port project faces sanctions complications, defence cooperation with Iran becomes far more difficult. India must therefore prioritize Chabahar and avoid actions that could jeopardize its diplomatic case.

U.S. sanctions also reduce transparency. When formal trade and cooperation are blocked, states sometimes rely on informal channels, shadow networks or indirect mechanisms. India should avoid such risky practices. As a responsible major power, India must maintain legal clarity. Defence cooperation with Iran should remain within permissible and transparent areas such as dialogue, consultation and non-sanctioned security discussions.

Sanctions also increase Iran's dependence on China and Russia. When India and other countries reduce cooperation under pressure, Iran turns to partners willing to bear greater risk. This creates a paradox for India: sanctions limit India's role in Iran while giving China more space. India must therefore negotiate carefully with the United States to preserve legitimate interests such as Chabahar and regional security dialogue.

In conclusion, U.S. sanctions severely limit India–Iran defence cooperation. They restrict transactions, discourage banks, create compliance risks and complicate strategic planning. In elevated diplomatic language, sanctions are

the extraterritorial architecture through which American financial power narrows India's defence space with Iran.

15.4.2 India's Relations With Iran's Rivals

India's relations with Iran's rivals are another major limitation on India–Iran defence cooperation. India has built strong ties with Israel, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf actors. Many of these states have strategic tensions with Iran. India's relationship with them is based on defence, technology, energy, investment, diaspora protection, maritime security and Indo-Pacific cooperation. Iran naturally watches these partnerships carefully.

Israel is especially sensitive for Iran. India–Israel defence cooperation has become deep and technologically significant. Israel supplies India with advanced defence systems, drones, missiles, surveillance technology, radars, cyber-security tools and counter-terrorism expertise. For India, this relationship is necessary and valuable. For Iran, Israel is a principal adversary. Therefore, any India–Iran defence cooperation must remain limited so that Tehran does not suspect India of acting as an indirect partner of Israel against Iran, and Israel does not suspect India of helping Iran militarily.

The United States is another sensitive factor. India–U.S. defence cooperation has expanded through foundational agreements, joint exercises, defence trade, maritime cooperation and advanced technology discussions. Iran views U.S. military presence in the Gulf and sanctions policy as hostile. India must therefore reassure Iran that India–U.S. cooperation is directed toward India's own security and Indo-Pacific balance, not participation in anti-Iran containment. At the same time, India must reassure Washington that India's Iran engagement is limited, transparent and connected to regional stability.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE also matter. India's relations with both countries have become strategic, involving energy, investment, diaspora, counter-terrorism, defence dialogue and maritime cooperation. These Gulf states have had complicated relations with Iran, though recent diplomacy has reduced some tensions. India cannot damage its Gulf partnerships by appearing militarily close to Iran. Millions of Indians live in the Gulf, and Gulf energy remains central to India's economy. Therefore, India must preserve Gulf trust.

India's relations with Iran's rivals are not a sign of anti-Iran policy. They are part of India's multi-alignment. India works with Israel for technology and

defence, with the Gulf for energy and investment, with the United States for Indo-Pacific and technology, and with Iran for Chabahar and Central Asia access. The challenge is that defence cooperation is more politically sensitive than trade or culture. Military cooperation with one side may be interpreted as alignment against another. Hence, India–Iran defence cooperation must remain carefully designed.

India can manage this limitation through issue separation. It can cooperate with Israel in defence technology, with Gulf states in maritime and energy security, with the United States in Indo-Pacific strategy, and with Iran in Chabahar-related security, terrorism consultation and Afghanistan dialogue. This requires disciplined diplomatic messaging. Each relationship must be explained according to its own purpose.

In conclusion, India's relations with Iran's rivals limit the depth of India–Iran defence cooperation but do not eliminate security dialogue. India must preserve all relationships without allowing one to destroy another. In refined language, India's defence diplomacy with Iran must be conducted under the shadow of *rival-partner sensitivity*.

15.4.3 Iran's Relations With China and Pakistan

Iran's relations with China and Pakistan also limit India–Iran defence cooperation. China is India's principal strategic competitor, and Pakistan is India's long-standing adversarial neighbour. Iran's ties with both countries are shaped by its own national interests, geography and sanctions environment. India must understand these ties realistically, but it must also protect its security interests.

China is extremely important to Iran because of energy trade, investment possibilities, diplomatic support, sanctions resistance and the 25-year cooperation framework. Under sanctions, China has become one of Iran's most important economic lifelines. Iran values China as a great-power partner capable of resisting Western pressure. However, for India, China's deepening presence in Iran raises concerns. If China gains influence over Iranian ports, railways, telecommunications, energy infrastructure or security sectors, India's strategic space may shrink.

China's relationship with Pakistan intensifies India's concern. China is Pakistan's strongest strategic partner, and CPEC connects China with Gwadar. If China also deepens cooperation with Iran, India must assess

whether China could influence the regional corridor environment from both Pakistan and Iran. This is especially sensitive for Chabahar. India does not want Chabahar to be overshadowed by Chinese-backed infrastructure or indirectly linked to China–Pakistan corridor priorities.

Iran's relations with Pakistan are also unavoidable. Iran and Pakistan share a long border, cultural and religious ties, border trade, energy discussions and security challenges. Iran cannot ignore Pakistan because instability in Pakistan's Balochistan can affect Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan. Yet Pakistan is India's principal security concern, especially due to terrorism, Kashmir, Afghanistan and China–Pakistan cooperation. Therefore, India must be cautious in sharing sensitive security information with Iran if there is any possibility of leakage or political sensitivity connected with Pakistan.

The Iran–Pakistan border has witnessed serious instability. Cross-border militancy, Jaish al-Adl activity, Baloch insurgency, smuggling and narcotics trafficking have created repeated tensions. The January 2024 Iran–Pakistan strikes showed that the relationship is not always smooth. Yet after crises, Iran and Pakistan usually seek de-escalation because geography compels them to cooperate. India must understand this *neighbourhood compulsion* in Iranian policy.

Iran may also use relations with China and Pakistan as part of diplomatic balancing. If India appears too close to the United States, Israel or Gulf rivals, Iran may lean more toward China and Pakistan. If India remains engaged through Chabahar, trade, culture and security consultation, Iran has more reason to preserve Indian space. Thus, India's answer to Iran's China–Pakistan ties is not withdrawal but sustained engagement.

The limitation is especially serious in intelligence cooperation. India will not share deeply sensitive information with Iran if Iran is perceived as too close to China or Pakistan on relevant issues. Iran may also be cautious because India has ties with the United States and Israel. Therefore, intelligence and defence cooperation will remain selective. Trust will be issue-specific rather than comprehensive.

In conclusion, Iran's relations with China and Pakistan create structural limits on India–Iran defence cooperation. They do not prevent dialogue, but they restrict depth. India must remain present in Iran while protecting sensitive security interests. In elevated geopolitical language, Iran's China–Pakistan

connections create a *strategic caution zone around India–Iran defence intimacy*.

Concluding Observation

The possibilities and limitations of India–Iran defence cooperation must be viewed together. There is real space for naval dialogue, counter-terrorism cooperation, Afghanistan-related consultation, Chabahar security, maritime safety and counter-narcotics awareness. These areas serve the interests of both countries and can be pursued without creating a formal alliance. However, the limitations are equally powerful: U.S. sanctions, India's relations with Iran's rivals, and Iran's relations with China and Pakistan prevent the defence relationship from becoming expansive.

India and Iran must therefore adopt a realistic model of defence cooperation. The relationship should be *practical rather than theatrical, consultative rather than alliance-based, and security-oriented rather than militarily provocative*. If handled with diplomatic finesse, India–Iran security cooperation can strengthen regional stability, protect Chabahar, support maritime safety and contribute to counter-terrorism. In the broader framework of India–Iran relations, defence cooperation should remain a *quiet strategic instrument serving connectivity, stability and mutual security without disturbing India's wider multi-alignment*.

Chapter 16:

Iran's Nuclear Question and India's Position

Iran's nuclear question is one of the most sensitive, prolonged and diplomatically intricate issues in contemporary international politics. It is not merely a technical debate about uranium enrichment, centrifuges, reactors and safeguards; it is a deep geopolitical controversy involving sovereignty, non-proliferation, sanctions, Western mistrust, Iranian nationalism, regional security, Israel's threat perception, Gulf anxieties, great-power rivalry and the future of the global nuclear order. For India, the issue is especially delicate because Iran is a valuable civilizational and connectivity partner, while the United States and the West are important for India's defence, technology, trade and global strategic rise. India's position, therefore, has been shaped by *strategic autonomy, non-proliferation responsibility, energy interest, regional stability and diplomatic prudence*.

The Iranian nuclear issue stands at the intersection of two competing principles. The first is the sovereign right of states, under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The second is the international community's concern that nuclear technology, especially uranium enrichment and plutonium-related capability, should not be diverted toward nuclear weapons. Iran emphasizes the first principle; the United States, Europe, Israel and several Gulf actors emphasize the second. The controversy has therefore become a contest between *nuclear entitlement* and *nuclear suspicion*.

India's position is complex but consistent. India has generally recognized Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy, provided that Iran fulfils its international obligations and cooperates with the International Atomic Energy Agency. India has also opposed the emergence of another nuclear-weapon state in its extended neighbourhood. Therefore, India has supported dialogue, diplomacy and negotiated settlement rather than military coercion or unilateral escalation. This position reflects India's own experience as a

nuclear-capable state outside the NPT, its commitment to responsible nuclear conduct, and its broader desire to avoid instability in West Asia.

The nuclear question also affects India–Iran relations directly. Sanctions imposed on Iran due to its nuclear programme have damaged India’s energy imports from Iran, complicated payment mechanisms, slowed investment, and affected projects such as Chabahar. At the same time, India cannot ignore Western concerns because India’s relations with the United States, Europe, Israel and Gulf Arab states are also strategically important. Thus, Iran’s nuclear issue has become a test of India’s *multi-aligned diplomacy*.

In the broader language of geopolitics, Iran’s nuclear question is not only about nuclear material; it is about *regional power distribution, technological sovereignty, sanctions power, Western strategic anxiety, Iranian national dignity and India’s diplomatic balancing*. It is a question where law, science, strategy and psychology converge.

16.1 Iran’s Nuclear Programme

Iran’s nuclear programme has a long and complex history. It began not as a revolutionary project, but as a modernizing project under the Shah of Iran. In its initial phase, Iran’s nuclear ambition was encouraged by the United States and Western countries as part of the broader Cold War-era belief that nuclear technology could symbolize progress, modernity and scientific prestige. The programme later passed through revolution, war, isolation, secrecy, sanctions, negotiation, partial restraint, renewed escalation and military confrontation. Its history is therefore a history of *technological aspiration transformed into geopolitical crisis*.

Iran’s nuclear programme includes several major components: uranium mining, uranium conversion, enrichment, research reactors, power generation, heavy-water technology and scientific infrastructure. Facilities such as Tehran Research Reactor, Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, Natanz enrichment facility, Fordow enrichment facility, Isfahan uranium conversion facility and Arak heavy-water reactor have all become part of the international nuclear debate. Some of these facilities are clearly civilian in declared purpose; others have raised concern because they can provide capabilities relevant to nuclear weapons if misused.

Iran presents its nuclear programme as a peaceful national project meant for electricity generation, medicine, agriculture, industry, scientific development and technological self-reliance. Iranian leaders repeatedly argue that the country has a legal right to nuclear technology under the NPT and that nuclear weapons are contrary to Iran's declared policy. However, Western countries and Israel argue that Iran's concealment of some activities, high-level enrichment, limited cooperation with inspectors and unresolved safeguards questions have created a serious proliferation concern.

The Iranian nuclear issue therefore cannot be analysed through propaganda alone. It requires a balanced understanding of Iran's legal rights, Iran's past secrecy, Western mistrust, Israeli security fears, IAEA verification standards, U.S. sanctions policy, and the internal Iranian meaning of nuclear technology as a symbol of sovereignty. In diplomatic language, it is a *high-density strategic dispute*, where every technical detail carries political weight.

16.1.1 Origin and Development

The origin of Iran's nuclear programme lies in the Cold War period, especially in the U.S.-supported *Atoms for Peace* initiative. Under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran sought nuclear technology as part of a broader modernization project. The Shah viewed nuclear energy as a symbol of scientific progress, national prestige and long-term energy planning. At that time, Western powers did not treat Iran's nuclear ambition with the same suspicion they later developed after the Islamic Revolution. The programme was born in an atmosphere of *technological optimism*, not immediate strategic confrontation.

The Tehran Research Reactor was one of the early symbols of Iran's nuclear development. It helped train scientists, produce radioisotopes and build a technical foundation for nuclear research. Iran also became a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear-weapon state, thereby accepting safeguards obligations while retaining the right to peaceful nuclear use. This legal framework later became the basis of Iran's argument that it had an *inalienable right* to nuclear technology.

In the 1970s, the Shah announced ambitious plans for nuclear power generation. Iran planned to build several nuclear power plants and develop a sophisticated nuclear-energy infrastructure. The Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant became the most visible project, originally involving German

participation. Iran also explored cooperation with France and other Western partners. The programme reflected the Shah's desire to make Iran a technologically advanced regional power. Nuclear energy was seen as part of Iran's future beyond oil.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 disrupted the programme. The new revolutionary leadership initially viewed many Shah-era nuclear projects as symbols of Western dependence and monarchical extravagance. The Iran–Iraq War further damaged national infrastructure and diverted state attention toward survival. Western firms withdrew, contracts collapsed, and the programme slowed. However, over time, Iran revived nuclear development, partly due to energy concerns, strategic insecurity, scientific pride and the desire for technological independence.

The Iran–Iraq War had a profound psychological impact on Iranian strategic culture. Iran suffered missile attacks, chemical weapons attacks and international isolation. Many Iranian policymakers concluded that the country must develop indigenous scientific and defence capabilities to avoid vulnerability. Although this does not automatically prove a weapons intention, it helps explain why nuclear technology became connected with national resilience and sovereignty. The nuclear programme became a *symbol of resistance against technological dependency*.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Iran's nuclear programme expanded with Russian assistance at Bushehr and with indigenous development in the fuel cycle. The emergence of facilities such as Natanz and Arak attracted international attention. The disclosure of previously undeclared nuclear activities in 2002 created a major diplomatic crisis. Western countries argued that secrecy suggested possible military ambition. Iran argued that concealment resulted from sanctions, technology denial and security concerns. This difference of interpretation became central to the dispute.

Natanz became important because it was associated with uranium enrichment. Uranium enrichment can be used for civilian reactor fuel, but higher levels of enrichment can move toward weapons relevance. Fordow became even more controversial because it was built underground and revealed later, increasing Western suspicion. Arak raised concern because heavy-water reactors can potentially produce plutonium suitable for weapons if not properly designed and monitored. Thus, the geography of Iran's nuclear programme became part of the *cartography of suspicion*.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action represented the most ambitious attempt to control and verify Iran's nuclear programme through diplomacy. Iran accepted restrictions on enrichment, centrifuges, uranium stockpiles and reactor design in exchange for sanctions relief. For a brief period, the JCPOA reduced tensions and created space for economic re-engagement. However, the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 and Iran's later reduction of compliance weakened the arrangement. The nuclear issue again entered a phase of escalation.

By the 2020s, Iran had enriched uranium at higher levels, expanded centrifuge capability and reduced certain monitoring measures. Western concerns grew sharply because uranium enriched to 60 percent has no ordinary power-reactor justification and is technically much closer to weapons-grade enrichment than low-enriched uranium. Iran argued that its steps were reversible responses to U.S. withdrawal and sanctions. The dispute therefore became not only technical but retaliatory: each side justified escalation by referring to the other's breach.

In conclusion, the origin and development of Iran's nuclear programme reveal a long journey from Western-supported modernization to revolutionary self-reliance, from civilian energy planning to international suspicion, and from negotiated restraint to renewed crisis. In refined language, Iran's nuclear programme is a *technological project transformed by revolution, war, sanctions and sovereignty into a central theatre of geopolitical contestation*.

16.1.2 Western Concerns

Western concerns regarding Iran's nuclear programme are rooted in the fear that Iran may acquire the capability to produce nuclear weapons, even if it does not openly declare such intention. The concern is not only about the existence of nuclear facilities; many countries have civilian nuclear facilities. The concern is about the combination of enrichment capacity, past secrecy, incomplete explanations to the IAEA, missile development, regional conflicts, reduced monitoring and high-level uranium enrichment. Together, these create what Western strategists call a *proliferation risk*.

The first major concern is uranium enrichment. Low-level enrichment can be used for peaceful nuclear power, but enrichment technology is inherently dual-use. Once a country masters enrichment, it acquires knowledge that can potentially be used to produce weapons-grade uranium if political decisions

change. Iran's enrichment at Natanz and Fordow therefore became a central issue. Western countries worry not only about what Iran says today, but what its technical capability may permit tomorrow.

The second concern is the level of enrichment. Under the JCPOA, Iran accepted a cap of 3.67 percent enrichment. Later enrichment to 20 percent and then 60 percent alarmed the West. Technically, the move from natural uranium to low-enriched uranium requires significant effort, but once enrichment reaches 60 percent, the remaining technical distance to weapons-grade levels is much shorter. This is why Western governments and the IAEA treated 60 percent enrichment as a serious escalation. It created a *threshold anxiety*.

The third concern is the history of undeclared activities. The discovery of previously undeclared sites and unresolved questions about uranium particles at undeclared locations damaged Iranian credibility. The IAEA's safeguards system depends on complete declarations, access and verification. When inspectors cannot fully account for nuclear material or activities, the concern becomes legal and technical. Western states argue that Iran must provide complete explanations to restore confidence.

The fourth concern is Fordow. The Fordow enrichment facility is built deep underground, making it difficult to attack and easier to protect. Iran argues that such protection is necessary because its facilities have been threatened and attacked. Western states and Israel argue that an underground enrichment facility has suspicious strategic value. The same fact is interpreted differently: for Iran it is *defensive hardening*; for the West it is *military-relevant concealment*.

The fifth concern is Arak and plutonium. The Arak heavy-water reactor, before redesign, raised concern because such a reactor could potentially produce plutonium suitable for nuclear weapons. The JCPOA addressed this by requiring redesign so that the reactor would not produce weapons-grade plutonium in significant quantities. This shows that Western concern was not limited to uranium enrichment; it also included the plutonium pathway.

The sixth concern is Iran's missile programme. A nuclear weapon requires not only fissile material but also weaponization and delivery systems. Iran's ballistic-missile development has therefore strengthened Western and Israeli concern. Iran argues that its missiles are defensive and necessary because it

faces hostile powers and cannot rely on advanced air forces. Western states argue that missiles combined with nuclear capability would create a dangerous regional balance. This creates a *missile-nuclear suspicion nexus*.

The seventh concern is regional behaviour. Iran's support for Hezbollah, Palestinian armed groups, militias in Iraq, the Syrian government and the Houthis in Yemen has led Western and Israeli policymakers to view Iran as a revisionist regional actor. Even if the nuclear programme is technically separate, Western states interpret it within Iran's broader regional posture. This means that nuclear concern is embedded in a wider *strategic mistrust architecture*.

The eighth concern is reduced cooperation with the IAEA. When monitoring cameras are removed, inspectors face restrictions, the Additional Protocol is not implemented, or access to certain sites becomes difficult, confidence declines. The IAEA does not simply trust declarations; it verifies them. Western countries therefore insist that Iran must provide full cooperation with inspectors. Without verification, peaceful claims cannot be diplomatically sufficient.

Western concerns have also been shaped by Israel's threat perception. Israel views a potential Iranian nuclear weapon as an existential danger. It fears that even a latent Iranian nuclear capability could embolden Iran and its regional allies. Israel has therefore supported strong sanctions, covert operations, sabotage and sometimes military threats. This Israeli position strongly influences U.S. and Western policy debates.

However, Western policy has also faced criticism. Critics argue that the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA damaged trust and encouraged Iranian escalation. They contend that Iran had accepted significant restrictions under the deal and that sanctions pressure undermined diplomacy. This does not remove proliferation concerns, but it complicates the moral and strategic evaluation of Western policy. The nuclear dispute is therefore shaped by mistrust on both sides.

In conclusion, Western concerns are based on enrichment levels, undeclared activities, verification gaps, Fordow, Arak, missile development and Iran's regional posture. These concerns are serious, but their resolution requires diplomacy, not only pressure. In elevated analytical language, Western

concern over Iran's nuclear programme is a *proliferation anxiety produced by dual-use technology, incomplete trust and regional insecurity*.

16.1.3 Iran's Claim of Peaceful Use

Iran's claim of peaceful use is central to its nuclear diplomacy. Tehran argues that its nuclear programme is intended for electricity generation, medical isotopes, scientific research, agriculture, industry and technological self-reliance. It insists that nuclear weapons are contrary to its declared policy and that Iran, as a party to the NPT, has the right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. This claim is not merely legal; it is deeply connected with Iranian nationalism, historical memory and resistance to external pressure.

Iran bases its argument on Article IV of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which recognizes the right of states to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, consistent with non-proliferation obligations. Iran argues that Western states accept nuclear technology for their allies but deny it to Iran through political pressure and sanctions. This creates, in Iranian discourse, a sense of *nuclear double standards*.

For Iran, the nuclear programme also symbolizes sovereignty. The country's modern history includes foreign intervention, the 1953 coup, Western support for the Shah, the Iran–Iraq War, sanctions and military threats. Against this background, nuclear technology has become a symbol of national dignity and scientific independence. Many Iranians, including those critical of their government, may still view nuclear capability as an issue of national pride. This emotional dimension is often underestimated by external powers.

Iran also argues that it needs nuclear energy for long-term development. Although Iran has large oil and gas reserves, it claims that diversification of energy sources is rational. Oil and gas can be exported or used in petrochemical industries, while nuclear energy can contribute to electricity generation and scientific development. This argument resembles the logic used by many energy-rich states that still pursue nuclear power for diversification and prestige.

Medical and scientific uses are also emphasized by Iran. Nuclear technology can produce radioisotopes for cancer treatment, medical diagnosis, agriculture, food preservation, water management and industrial applications. The Tehran Research Reactor and other facilities have been cited by Iran as

evidence of practical civilian need. Iran argues that sanctions and fuel denial forced it to develop domestic enrichment capability to supply such needs.

Iran's leaders have also referred to religious and ethical objections to nuclear weapons. Iranian officials have repeatedly cited the Supreme Leader's position that nuclear weapons are forbidden. Whether external actors accept this as sufficient is another matter. For Iran, however, this claim forms part of its moral argument that the programme is peaceful. In diplomacy, declarations of intent are important but not enough; they require verification. This is where Iran's claim and Western demands intersect.

Iran also argues that its nuclear escalation after 2018 was a response to the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and reimposition of sanctions. From Tehran's viewpoint, it accepted restrictions but did not receive durable economic benefits because Washington abandoned the agreement. Therefore, Iran sees higher enrichment and reduced compliance as pressure tools to restore balance. Western countries see the same actions as dangerous nuclear escalation. This is the *mirror-image logic* of the dispute.

The problem for Iran is that peaceful-use claims require transparency. Under the NPT system, rights are linked with obligations. A state may claim peaceful intent, but it must also cooperate with safeguards to reassure the international community. Iran's difficulty has been that verification gaps, undeclared-material questions and restrictions on IAEA access have weakened the credibility of its claim. Thus, Iran's peaceful-use argument is legally meaningful but diplomatically incomplete without full verification.

India's position broadly recognizes this balance. India supports the right to peaceful nuclear energy but also emphasizes safeguards obligations and diplomatic resolution. India does not support another nuclear-weapon power emerging in its extended neighbourhood. At the same time, India opposes military escalation and supports dialogue. This makes India's position measured: Iran has rights, but rights must be exercised with responsibility.

In conclusion, Iran's claim of peaceful use is rooted in NPT rights, technological sovereignty, energy diversification, medical needs, national pride and resistance to Western pressure. Yet this claim can gain international acceptance only through transparent cooperation with the IAEA and credible assurance that nuclear material is not diverted. In refined diplomatic

vocabulary, Iran's peaceful-use claim is a *sovereignty-based legal argument that requires verification-based international confidence*.

Concluding Observation

Iran's nuclear programme is one of the most complicated issues in India–Iran geopolitics. It began as a Western-supported modernization project, became a symbol of Iranian sovereignty after revolution and war, and later turned into a global non-proliferation controversy. Western concerns arise from enrichment capability, undeclared activities, monitoring gaps, missile development and regional mistrust. Iran claims peaceful use, legal entitlement and technological independence. Both positions contain elements of legal and strategic logic, but both are weakened by mistrust.

India's position must remain balanced and principled. India should support Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy, provided Iran fulfils its safeguards obligations. India should oppose nuclear proliferation in its neighbourhood, support the IAEA's verification role, encourage diplomatic settlement, and avoid military escalation. The correct Indian policy is neither blind support for Iran nor automatic alignment with Western pressure. It is *responsible strategic autonomy*. In the larger framework of India–Iran relations, the nuclear question is a *diplomatic test of India's ability to balance friendship, non-proliferation, energy interest and regional stability*.

16.2 India's Position on Iran's Nuclear Issue

India's position on Iran's nuclear issue has been marked by *strategic caution, legal balance, non-proliferation responsibility and diplomatic autonomy*. India has neither endorsed Western coercive maximalism nor accepted Iran's claims without qualification. Instead, it has attempted to maintain a carefully constructed position: Iran, as a sovereign state and a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, has the right to peaceful nuclear energy; however, that right must be exercised in conformity with safeguards, transparency and international obligations. This dual formulation has allowed India to preserve its friendship with Iran while also demonstrating responsibility toward the global non-proliferation regime.

India's position is shaped by its own nuclear history. India is a nuclear-weapon state outside the NPT framework, but it has consistently emphasized responsible nuclear behaviour, no-first-use doctrine, export-control

credibility, civilian nuclear safety and opposition to irresponsible proliferation. India's nuclear exceptionalism has been defended on the ground that India did not proliferate sensitive technology to others and maintained a strong record of restraint. Therefore, India cannot appear indifferent to the possibility of nuclear proliferation in its extended neighbourhood. Iran's nuclear issue is thus not only a diplomatic question for India; it is also a test of India's image as a *responsible nuclear power*.

At the same time, India cannot ignore Iran's importance. Iran is a civilizational partner, an energy source, a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, a Chabahar partner and a major state in West Asian geopolitics. India's approach has therefore avoided public humiliation of Iran. Even when India voted in favour of IAEA resolutions critical of Iran, Indian leaders emphasized that India-Iran ties were civilizational, multifaceted and valuable. This shows that India's policy was not anti-Iranian; it was an attempt to balance Iran friendship with international nuclear responsibility.

India's approach has also been shaped by its relations with the United States and the West. The period of India's votes on Iran at the IAEA coincided with the expansion of India-U.S. strategic relations and the civil nuclear agreement. Critics argued that India was under American pressure; supporters argued that India had independent reasons to oppose proliferation. The truth lies in a more nuanced middle ground. India was certainly aware of American expectations, but it also had its own security concerns about clandestine proliferation networks, some of which had roots in India's neighbourhood. Thus, India's position was a blend of *external diplomatic pressure* and *internal strategic reasoning*.

India's policy has generally preferred negotiation over coercion. India has supported dialogue between Iran and the IAEA, encouraged diplomatic settlement, welcomed agreements that reduce tensions, and avoided endorsing military solutions. India understands that war over Iran's nuclear issue would destabilize West Asia, threaten oil routes, endanger Indian citizens in the Gulf, affect Chabahar, increase energy prices and create wider regional disorder. Therefore, India's nuclear diplomacy toward Iran is fundamentally a diplomacy of *peaceful resolution through verified assurance*.

In conclusion, India's position on Iran's nuclear issue is neither passive neutrality nor unconditional support. It is a carefully balanced policy that

combines peaceful nuclear rights, safeguards obligations, opposition to proliferation, diplomatic dialogue and protection of India's national interests. In refined diplomatic language, India's position is a *sovereign equilibrium between Iran's nuclear entitlement and the international community's verification anxiety*.

16.2.1 Support for Peaceful Nuclear Energy

India's support for peaceful nuclear energy is rooted in principle, experience and law. India has consistently maintained that every state has the right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, provided it fulfils its international obligations. In Iran's case, India has recognized that Iran, as a member of the NPT, possesses the legal right to peaceful nuclear technology. This includes nuclear research, power generation, medical isotopes, industrial use, agricultural applications and scientific development. India does not accept the argument that a country should be permanently denied peaceful technology merely because it is politically inconvenient to powerful states.

India's own development experience makes it sympathetic to the idea of technological sovereignty. India faced decades of nuclear restrictions, technology denial and strategic discrimination after its nuclear programme developed outside the NPT. Indian policymakers understand that scientific self-reliance is deeply connected with national dignity. Therefore, India can appreciate why Iran presents nuclear technology as a symbol of sovereignty, modernization and resistance to external pressure. This sympathy, however, does not mean India accepts opacity or weaponization. It means India recognizes the legitimacy of *peaceful technological aspiration*.

The peaceful-use principle is also embedded in the nuclear non-proliferation bargain. The NPT is built on three broad pillars: non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful use. Non-nuclear-weapon states accept restrictions against acquiring nuclear weapons, while retaining access to peaceful nuclear energy under safeguards. Iran's argument derives from this structure. India, although outside the NPT, understands the importance of this balance. If peaceful use is denied arbitrarily, the legitimacy of the entire nuclear order weakens.

India's support for peaceful nuclear energy also reflects its broader position on development. Nuclear energy can support electricity generation, medical treatment, research, desalination, industrial processes and climate goals. In a

world facing energy insecurity and climate change, peaceful nuclear technology cannot be treated only through suspicion. India itself uses nuclear energy as part of its development strategy. Hence, India cannot deny in principle what it claims for itself in practice.

However, India's support is not unconditional. Peaceful nuclear energy must be accompanied by safeguards, transparency and IAEA verification. A state claiming peaceful use must create confidence that nuclear material is not diverted toward weapons. India's position therefore combines rights with responsibilities. This is the *rights-obligations equilibrium* at the heart of India's policy.

India also prefers that peaceful nuclear disputes be resolved through diplomatic mechanisms, not military attacks. Military action against nuclear facilities can create environmental danger, civilian casualties, escalation and regional war. India's support for peaceful nuclear energy is therefore linked with support for peaceful settlement. A nuclear issue must be handled through law, inspection and negotiation, not reckless force.

In conclusion, India supports Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy because it is consistent with sovereignty, development, scientific progress and the nuclear bargain. Yet India insists that peaceful use must remain verifiable. In elevated language, India's support is a *principled endorsement of nuclear development under the discipline of international confidence*.

16.2.2 Opposition to Nuclear Proliferation

India's opposition to nuclear proliferation is a central pillar of its position on Iran's nuclear issue. India does not want the emergence of another nuclear-weapon state in West Asia. A nuclear-armed Iran would transform the regional balance, provoke reactions from Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other powers, destabilize the Gulf, increase the risk of military confrontation and weaken the global non-proliferation architecture. For India, such an outcome would create a dangerous strategic environment in its extended neighbourhood.

India's opposition to proliferation is shaped by direct experience. India has faced the consequences of clandestine proliferation networks in its own region. The spread of sensitive nuclear technology through illicit channels created serious security concerns for India. Therefore, when India speaks against proliferation, it is not merely repeating Western language; it is

defending its own national security. Proliferation in West Asia can combine with missiles, terrorism, regional proxy conflicts and maritime chokepoints, creating an extremely volatile environment.

India also recognizes that the Iran nuclear issue cannot be separated from regional security. Israel views a possible Iranian nuclear weapon as an existential threat. Gulf Arab states fear Iranian strategic dominance. The United States views Iran's nuclear capability as a challenge to its regional order. If Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, regional powers may seek their own deterrent capabilities or external nuclear guarantees. This could produce a *cascade of nuclear insecurity* across West Asia.

India's opposition to proliferation is also linked with energy security. West Asia is one of India's most important energy regions. Nuclear instability there would endanger oil routes, LNG shipments, Indian workers, remittances and maritime trade. A nuclear crisis in the Persian Gulf would not remain a local event; it would immediately affect India's economy. Therefore, opposing proliferation is also a form of economic prudence.

India's position is made more credible by its own responsible nuclear record. India has maintained export-control discipline, supported nuclear security, and avoided transferring sensitive technologies to other states or non-state actors. India's argument is that responsible nuclear behaviour matters more than formal treaty labels alone. Therefore, India expects Iran to reassure the world through transparency and verification.

However, India also understands that non-proliferation cannot be enforced only through punishment. Excessive sanctions, regime-change rhetoric and military threats can harden Iran's position. A sustainable non-proliferation outcome requires incentives, security assurances, phased relief, inspections and negotiated settlement. India's opposition to proliferation therefore does not translate into support for unlimited pressure. It supports *coercion-limited diplomacy*.

India's opposition also extends to non-state actors. In a region where militias, terror networks and proxy groups operate, the risk of sensitive materials, scientific knowledge or radiological substances reaching irresponsible actors is alarming. Strong safeguards and export controls are therefore essential. Non-proliferation is not only about states; it is also about preventing nuclear insecurity in a hybrid-conflict environment.

In conclusion, India opposes nuclear proliferation because it threatens regional stability, energy security, maritime safety, strategic balance and global nuclear order. India's position is therefore responsible and interest-based. In refined strategic language, India's opposition to proliferation is a *security doctrine designed to prevent West Asia from becoming a nuclearized theatre of permanent crisis*.

16.2.3 Diplomatic Balancing

Diplomatic balancing is the most important practical feature of India's position on Iran's nuclear issue. India must balance Iran's friendship, Western concerns, U.S. pressure, Israeli anxiety, Gulf stability, energy needs, Chabahar interests and non-proliferation responsibility. No single principle can solve this entire problem. India must therefore operate through *layered diplomacy*, where each relationship is handled according to its own strategic value.

India's balancing begins with language. Indian statements usually avoid inflammatory accusations and emphasize peaceful resolution, dialogue, Iran's rights, safeguards obligations and IAEA processes. This language allows India to maintain communication with Iran while preserving credibility with the international community. Diplomatic language is not decorative; it is a tool of strategic management.

India's balancing also involves voting behaviour. India has at times voted in favour of IAEA resolutions critical of Iran, but it has simultaneously emphasized that such votes should not be interpreted as hostility toward Iran. India has argued that Iran's rights and obligations must be upheld together. This dual message is central to Indian diplomacy. India wants Iran to cooperate with the IAEA, but it does not want Iran to be isolated beyond reconciliation.

The United States factor makes balancing difficult. India's strategic partnership with the United States is central to defence, technology, Indo-Pacific strategy and global influence. Washington has often expected India to support pressure on Iran. At the same time, Iran is central to India's Chabahar and Central Asia strategy. India therefore cannot simply follow Washington's Iran policy. It must negotiate space for its own interests. This is *strategic autonomy under diplomatic pressure*.

Israel and Gulf states also shape the balance. India has strong ties with Israel in defence and technology, and strong ties with Gulf Arab states in energy, investment and diaspora welfare. These actors are deeply concerned about Iran's nuclear capability. India cannot ignore their concerns because they are important partners. Yet India cannot allow those concerns to eliminate India–Iran cooperation. Balancing therefore requires continuous reassurance to all sides.

India also balances between principle and pragmatism. As a responsible nuclear power, India supports non-proliferation and safeguards. As a rising power with connectivity needs, India supports engagement with Iran. As a major energy consumer, India wants regional stability. As a civilizational state, India values historical ties with Iran. As a democracy seeking advanced technology, India values Western partnerships. Indian diplomacy must carry all these interests simultaneously.

The success of diplomatic balancing depends on execution. If India speaks of Iran's importance but delays Chabahar, Tehran may doubt India's seriousness. If India speaks of non-proliferation but ignores IAEA concerns, Western partners may doubt India's responsibility. If India speaks of strategic autonomy but avoids difficult decisions, the policy loses credibility. Balancing requires not only correct words but consistent action.

In conclusion, India's diplomatic balancing on Iran's nuclear issue is a sophisticated exercise in multi-alignment. It protects Iran ties, respects non-proliferation, manages U.S. relations, reassures Israel and Gulf states, and preserves India's autonomy. In elevated diplomatic vocabulary, India's balancing is the *art of holding contradictory necessities within one coherent national-interest framework*.

16.3 Impact on India–Iran Relations

Iran's nuclear issue has had a deep and recurring impact on India–Iran relations. It has affected diplomacy, energy trade, investment, banking, Chabahar, multilateral voting, public perception and strategic trust. India and Iran have rarely had a direct bilateral dispute over the substance of nuclear technology; the main problem has been the external pressure generated by Iran's nuclear controversy. Thus, the nuclear issue functions as an *external stress-test* for India–Iran relations.

The impact has been uneven across sectors. Civilizational ties, cultural exchanges and political dialogue have continued. Chabahar has remained important. Afghanistan and Central Asia cooperation have remained relevant. However, energy trade and banking have suffered severely under sanctions. Iran's nuclear issue therefore did not destroy India–Iran relations, but it reduced their economic depth and slowed their strategic potential.

The nuclear issue also created mistrust at certain moments. Iran sometimes perceived India's IAEA votes as evidence that India was tilting toward the United States. India, on the other hand, saw its position as a responsible balance between Iran's rights and international obligations. This difference in perception shows how multilateral voting can affect bilateral sentiment. In diplomacy, even carefully worded positions can be emotionally interpreted by partners.

At the same time, India and Iran have shown resilience. Despite sanctions, votes and pressure, both countries continued to value the relationship. India continued to emphasize civilizational ties and Chabahar. Iran continued to see India as an important Asian partner. The relationship survived because it rests on geography and history, not only on current political convenience.

In conclusion, Iran's nuclear issue has constrained India–Iran relations but not erased them. It has reduced energy trade, complicated diplomacy and increased external pressure, while also proving the durability of India–Iran civilizational and strategic ties. In refined language, the nuclear issue is the *sanctions-bearing cloud under which India–Iran cooperation continues to search for strategic sunlight*.

16.3.1 Diplomatic Pressure on India

Diplomatic pressure on India has been one of the most significant consequences of Iran's nuclear issue. The United States and some Western partners have repeatedly expected India to support stronger pressure on Iran, reduce Iranian oil imports, comply with sanctions and align with non-proliferation demands. Iran, on the other hand, has expected India to respect its peaceful nuclear rights, resist excessive Western pressure and preserve bilateral cooperation. India has therefore faced pressure from both sides.

The pressure from the United States became particularly significant during the period of the India–U.S. civil nuclear agreement. Critics in India argued that Washington's expectations influenced India's IAEA votes on Iran. The

Indian government argued that its position was based on India's own national interest, non-proliferation concerns and the need for Iran to cooperate with the IAEA. This debate revealed the domestic sensitivity of Iran policy in India.

India's diplomatic pressure also came from energy realities. Iranian oil was commercially attractive and strategically useful, but sanctions made it difficult to purchase. Indian refiners, banks, insurers and shipping companies faced legal and financial risks. Thus, diplomatic pressure moved into the commercial sphere. A government may wish to balance, but firms often respond to compliance risk. This is the power of *sanctions-induced diplomatic compression*.

Iran also exerted pressure, though differently. Tehran expected India to maintain oil purchases, invest in projects, support Iran diplomatically and avoid appearing subordinate to U.S. pressure. When India reduced imports or voted against Iran at the IAEA, Iranian disappointment increased. Iran's response was not always dramatic, but the emotional impact was real. Civilizational friendship does not eliminate strategic disappointment.

Diplomatic pressure also affected Chabahar. India had to persuade the United States that Chabahar served Afghanistan and regional connectivity, not sanctions evasion. It also had to reassure Iran that India remained committed despite delays. This required a dual negotiation: one with Washington for legal space, and one with Tehran for political trust. Chabahar thus became a *diplomatic balancing platform*.

India managed pressure through careful statements, high-level contacts, issue separation and strategic patience. It avoided condemning Iran in broad ideological terms, while also supporting IAEA procedures. It maintained relations with the United States without abandoning Iran. This approach did not satisfy everyone, but it preserved India's core interests. In complex diplomacy, complete satisfaction of all parties is impossible; survival of interests is success.

In conclusion, diplomatic pressure on India arose from U.S. sanctions, Western non-proliferation concerns, Iranian expectations and Indian domestic debate. India's response required composure and autonomy. In elevated diplomatic language, India faced a *pressure triangle of Washington's expectations, Tehran's sensitivities and New Delhi's national interest*.

16.3.2 Voting at International Forums

Voting at international forums has been one of the most visible and controversial aspects of India's position on Iran's nuclear issue. India's votes at the IAEA in 2005, 2006 and later discussions created debate in India, Iran and the wider international community. These votes were interpreted by different observers in different ways. Some saw them as evidence of India's responsible non-proliferation policy; others saw them as signs of India yielding to U.S. pressure. The truth is more complex.

India's vote in 2005 at the IAEA was significant because it supported a resolution finding Iran in non-compliance with safeguards obligations. This was politically sensitive because India had traditionally maintained close ties with Iran. Indian officials argued that the vote was based on IAEA findings and India's concern over unresolved questions. They also emphasized that Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy remained intact. This was a classic example of *rights-with-obligations diplomacy*.

The 2006 vote referring Iran's nuclear issue to the United Nations Security Council deepened the controversy. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh explained in Parliament that India's vote did not detract from traditionally close India–Iran relations and that Iran had the legal right to peaceful nuclear energy consistent with safeguards. He also emphasized unresolved IAEA questions and India's security concerns about proliferation in its extended neighbourhood. This statement was important because it framed India's vote as a balance between friendship and responsibility.

India's later voting behaviour continued the same broad logic. India supported IAEA processes while calling for dialogue and avoiding excessive punitive language. In 2009, India's explanation of vote again emphasized peaceful nuclear rights, safeguards obligations, dialogue and the importance of preserving the integrity of the IAEA system. This showed that India's position was not episodic; it followed a consistent diplomatic pattern.

Voting at international forums affected India–Iran trust. Iran was disappointed because it expected India, as a friendly Asian power, to show greater support. Some Iranian analysts saw India's vote as evidence of U.S. influence. India, however, saw its vote as necessary to preserve non-proliferation credibility and protect its own security concerns. This difference illustrates how multilateral votes can carry bilateral emotional weight.

India's voting also affected domestic politics. Indian political parties, strategic experts and public intellectuals debated whether India had compromised strategic autonomy. Supporters of the government argued that India could not ignore proliferation concerns, especially given clandestine networks in the region. Critics argued that India had harmed a valuable relationship with Iran. The debate showed that Iran policy is not merely external; it has internal political resonance.

At international forums, India must continue to follow a balanced approach. It should support peaceful nuclear rights, insist on safeguards, back IAEA verification, oppose proliferation, and encourage negotiated settlement. It should avoid extreme positions that either isolate Iran completely or ignore legitimate concerns. India's vote should reflect India's independent judgement, not automatic alignment.

In conclusion, India's voting at international forums has been a delicate instrument of nuclear diplomacy. It has sometimes caused discomfort with Iran, but it has also demonstrated India's commitment to responsible nuclear conduct. In refined language, India's voting behaviour represents the *public theatre in which strategic autonomy, friendship and non-proliferation responsibility visibly collide*.

16.3.3 Effect on Energy and Trade

The effect of Iran's nuclear issue on India–Iran energy and trade has been profound. Energy was once one of the strongest pillars of India–Iran relations. Iran supplied crude oil to India, and India valued Iranian crude because of geographical proximity, refinery suitability and commercial terms. However, nuclear-related sanctions and U.S. secondary sanctions severely disrupted this energy relationship. The nuclear issue therefore transformed India–Iran trade from a natural partnership into a sanctions-bound difficulty.

Iranian oil had strategic value for India because energy security depends on supplier diversity. A diversified basket reduces vulnerability to price shocks, political pressure and regional crises. Iran's location near India made it a convenient supplier. In the past, India also used payment mechanisms such as rupee arrangements to continue trade under sanctions. These mechanisms demonstrated India's desire to preserve energy links despite external pressure.

However, after the reimposition of U.S. sanctions following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, India sharply reduced and eventually halted formal Iranian crude imports. This had multiple consequences. India had to replace Iranian oil with supplies from other producers. Indian refiners lost a familiar crude source. Iran lost a major Asian buyer. China gained relatively more space as a buyer of sanctioned Iranian oil. Thus, sanctions changed not only trade flows but also influence patterns.

The effect on trade was not limited to oil. Banking restrictions affected pharmaceuticals, food, machinery, agricultural goods, chemicals, tea, rice and other products. Even when some items were not directly sanctioned, payment and shipping difficulties discouraged trade. This is the problem of *over-compliance*: companies avoid legal trade because they fear regulatory risk. As a result, the entire trade relationship weakens.

The nuclear issue also affected investment. Indian companies became cautious about projects in Iran because sanctions could affect financing, insurance, shipping and technology. Chabahar was treated as a special case because of its regional and humanitarian relevance, but even Chabahar faced delays and uncertainty. The nuclear issue therefore indirectly slowed India's connectivity strategy.

Energy and trade disruption also affected diplomatic psychology. Iran expected India to maintain economic engagement, while India had to protect its companies and broader strategic interests. This produced Iranian disappointment and Indian discomfort. Economic decline can reduce diplomatic warmth because regular trade creates regular communication. When trade falls, strategic relationships become more dependent on symbolism.

The effect on India's energy policy has been diversification. India increased purchases from other suppliers and adjusted its refinery choices. Over time, India expanded relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the United States, Russia and others. This diversification helped India manage immediate supply needs, but it did not erase Iran's long-term value. A major energy consumer benefits from keeping all possible suppliers available.

Recent temporary waivers and renewed offers of Iranian oil show that the India–Iran energy relationship can revive if legal and banking conditions permit. However, revival will depend on sanctions clarity, payment

mechanisms, insurance, shipping, refinery commitments and political stability. The lesson is clear: energy relations cannot flourish under uncertainty. Energy trade needs stable legal architecture.

In conclusion, Iran's nuclear issue has had a major negative effect on India–Iran energy and trade. It reduced oil imports, complicated banking, discouraged investment and weakened commercial momentum. Yet the underlying complementarity remains. India needs energy diversification; Iran needs reliable markets. In elevated geopolitical language, the nuclear issue turned India–Iran energy cooperation into a *hydrocarbon partnership trapped inside the cage of sanctions geopolitics*.

Concluding Observation

India's position on Iran's nuclear issue reveals the maturity and difficulty of Indian foreign policy. India supports Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy but opposes nuclear proliferation. It respects Iran as a civilizational partner but also insists on safeguards and IAEA credibility. It values the United States and the West but refuses to reduce Iran policy to external pressure. This is the essence of *strategic autonomy under nuclear scrutiny*.

The impact on India–Iran relations has been serious but not fatal. Diplomatic pressure, IAEA voting controversies, sanctions, energy disruption and trade decline have constrained the relationship. Yet Chabahar, civilizational links, Afghanistan, Central Asia and regional diplomacy continue to sustain India–Iran engagement. India's challenge is to preserve Iran relations while protecting its non-proliferation credibility and wider strategic partnerships. In the broader architecture of Indian diplomacy, the Iranian nuclear issue is a *complex test of India's ability to balance law, friendship, energy, security and autonomy within a turbulent world order*.

16.4 Future of the Nuclear Issue

The future of Iran's nuclear issue will remain one of the most consequential questions in West Asian and global geopolitics. It will influence Iran's relations with the United States, Europe, Russia, China, Israel, Gulf Arab states and India. It will affect sanctions, energy markets, maritime routes, regional wars, nuclear non-proliferation, the legitimacy of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the balance of power in the Persian Gulf. The

nuclear issue is therefore not merely a technical file; it is a *strategic barometer* of West Asian stability.

The future will depend upon whether the major actors can restore a credible balance between Iran's claim of peaceful nuclear rights and the international community's demand for verifiable assurance. Iran will continue to insist that it has a sovereign right to nuclear technology, uranium enrichment and scientific development. Western powers and Israel will continue to insist that Iran must not reach a nuclear-weapons threshold. The International Atomic Energy Agency will continue to demand access, declarations and monitoring. Thus, the future will be shaped by a three-sided tension among *sovereignty*, *verification* and *security anxiety*.

The collapse or weakening of the JCPOA has made the future more uncertain. The 2015 agreement showed that diplomacy can work when restrictions, monitoring and sanctions relief are combined. However, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement, Iran's later nuclear advances, renewed sanctions, military attacks, mistrust and domestic politics in all concerned countries have made a return to the earlier model difficult. Future negotiations will therefore need either a revived JCPOA-like structure or a new framework that addresses enrichment, stockpiles, inspections, sanctions relief, regional security and sequencing of obligations.

For India, the future of Iran's nuclear issue is directly connected with national interest. A negotiated settlement can revive energy trade, reduce sanctions risk, improve Chabahar prospects, stabilize the Persian Gulf, reduce oil-price volatility and preserve India's diplomatic space with both Iran and the West. A military escalation, by contrast, can endanger Indian citizens in the Gulf, disrupt oil and LNG supplies, increase maritime insurance costs, damage Chabahar, strengthen China's role in Iran, and reduce India's ability to conduct balanced West Asia policy. Therefore, India has a profound interest in *verified diplomatic settlement*.

The future will also depend on regional security architecture. Iran's nuclear question cannot be isolated from Iran–Israel hostility, U.S. military presence, Gulf Arab anxieties, missile programmes, proxy conflicts, sanctions and maritime insecurity. Even if a nuclear agreement is reached, it may remain fragile unless regional actors also reduce military tensions. The nuclear issue is a symptom of deeper insecurity; it cannot be permanently solved by

technical restrictions alone. A durable settlement requires *security reassurance* alongside *nuclear verification*.

In classical geopolitical terms, the future of the nuclear issue lies at the intersection of Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History*, Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace*, and Daniel Yergin's *The Quest*. The dispute affects sea routes, Eurasian access, rimland balance and energy security at the same time. Iran's nuclear future is therefore not only about centrifuges; it is about the strategic architecture of the Gulf, the Indian Ocean and Eurasia.

In conclusion, the future of Iran's nuclear issue will remain uncertain, but three possibilities are visible: negotiated restraint, prolonged sanctions-driven ambiguity, or dangerous military escalation. India's preference must clearly be the first: a verifiable, diplomatic, legally grounded and regionally stabilizing settlement. In refined diplomatic language, the future of Iran's nuclear issue is a *contest between verified diplomacy and militarized mistrust*.

16.4.1 Possibility of Negotiations

The possibility of negotiations remains alive because no major actor can easily afford the consequences of total collapse. Iran needs sanctions relief, investment, energy-market access, financial normalization and international legitimacy. The United States and Europe need assurance that Iran will not acquire nuclear weapons. Israel seeks security against a perceived existential threat. Gulf Arab states want stability, energy-market predictability and protection of infrastructure. Russia and China prefer a weakened Western sanctions order but also do not want uncontrolled nuclear escalation near their strategic interests. India wants regional stability, energy security and preservation of Chabahar. These overlapping interests create space for diplomacy.

Negotiations are possible because the nuclear issue has already produced a successful diplomatic model once. The JCPOA showed that Iran was willing to accept limits on enrichment, centrifuges, stockpiles and reactor design in exchange for sanctions relief. It also showed that the IAEA can design intrusive verification mechanisms if political agreement exists. Although the previous agreement weakened, its memory remains valuable. Diplomacy rarely begins from nothing; it often begins from *discarded architecture*.

Future negotiations, however, will be more difficult than the 2015 process. Iran's nuclear programme has advanced technologically. Trust in U.S. commitments has weakened in Tehran because Washington withdrew from the JCPOA. Western and Israeli suspicion has deepened because Iran expanded enrichment and limited monitoring. Domestic political pressures in Iran, the United States and Israel have hardened positions. Therefore, any future negotiation must overcome not only technical questions but *accumulated diplomatic injury*.

A major issue will be enrichment. Iran is unlikely to accept complete surrender of enrichment because enrichment has become a symbol of sovereignty and scientific dignity. The United States and Israel may demand strict limits, low enrichment, stockpile reduction, export of enriched material, dismantling or sealing of advanced centrifuges, and continuous monitoring. The possible middle path may involve tightly capped enrichment, rigorous inspection, real-time monitoring, declared stockpile management and automatic consequences for violation. This would be a *sovereignty-with-verification compromise*.

Another issue will be sanctions relief. Iran will not accept restrictions without meaningful economic benefit. However, sanctions relief is complicated because U.S. sanctions are layered through executive orders, congressional laws, terrorism designations, human-rights measures, missile sanctions and banking restrictions. Even when governments announce relief, companies may remain cautious. Thus, future negotiations must address not only legal sanctions but also commercial confidence. A nuclear deal that does not restore economic benefit will not survive politically in Iran.

Verification will be the central pillar. The IAEA must be able to access relevant sites, monitor nuclear material, verify inventories, inspect centrifuge production, check seals, and resolve outstanding safeguards questions. Without verification, no agreement can satisfy Western or international concerns. Iran may demand respect for security sensitivities after attacks on its facilities, but verification cannot become optional. The future deal must find technical modalities that protect legitimate security concerns while preserving the IAEA's authority.

Sequencing will be another difficult matter. Iran will want sanctions relief before major nuclear concessions; the United States and Europe will want nuclear steps before sanctions relief. This creates the classic diplomatic

problem of mistrust. A phased approach may be necessary: limited sanctions relief in exchange for immediate inspection access; further relief in exchange for stockpile reduction; banking normalization in exchange for long-term monitoring; and broader economic reintegration after verified compliance. Such sequencing would require *reciprocal gradualism*.

Regional actors must also be considered. Israel may oppose any deal it views as insufficiently restrictive. Gulf states may support diplomacy but demand consultation. Russia and China may shape negotiations through the UN Security Council and their own interests. India may not be at the negotiating table, but it will be affected by the result. Therefore, the negotiation framework must be internationally credible and regionally intelligible.

India should support negotiations publicly and quietly. It should encourage Iran to cooperate with the IAEA, encourage the United States and Europe to offer realistic sanctions relief, and encourage all parties to avoid military action. India can also use its relations with Iran, the United States, Gulf states, Israel and Russia to support diplomatic restraint. India may not be a principal mediator, but it can be a responsible voice for *stabilizing diplomacy*.

In conclusion, negotiations are possible because every alternative is dangerous. Yet negotiations will require political courage, technical precision, sanctions realism and verification credibility. In elevated diplomatic vocabulary, the possibility of negotiations rests on the ability of hostile actors to convert *mutual exhaustion into structured compromise*.

16.4.2 Regional Security Concerns

Regional security concerns are central to the future of Iran's nuclear issue. The nuclear dispute does not exist in a vacuum. It is connected with Iran–Israel hostility, missile programmes, Gulf Arab anxieties, U.S. military presence, proxy conflicts, maritime insecurity, sanctions, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Gaza, Afghanistan and the broader balance of power in West Asia. Therefore, a nuclear agreement may reduce danger, but it cannot alone solve regional insecurity. The nuclear question is embedded in a *regional conflict ecosystem*.

Israel's concern is the most intense. Israel views a potential Iranian nuclear weapon or even a near-threshold capability as a grave strategic threat. Israeli security thinking is shaped by historical trauma, geographical vulnerability and the perception that Iran supports armed groups hostile to Israel.

Therefore, Israel may consider military action if diplomacy fails or if it believes Iran is approaching weaponization. This creates a constant risk of preventive strikes, retaliation and regional war.

Iran's security concern is also serious. Iran views itself as surrounded by hostile forces: U.S. military bases, Israeli threats, sanctions, Gulf rivalries and historical memories of foreign intervention. Iranian leaders argue that their missile programme, regional alliances and hardened nuclear facilities are defensive responses to external pressure. Whether other states accept this argument is another matter, but the perception itself shapes Iranian policy. Security fears on both sides produce a *spiral of suspicion*.

Gulf Arab states have their own concerns. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman differ in their approach to Iran, but all are affected by Gulf instability. They worry about missiles, drones, attacks on oil infrastructure, tanker incidents, cyber threats and nuclear escalation. Some Gulf states seek deterrence through U.S. security ties; others also pursue dialogue with Iran. Their main interest is stability because economic diversification depends on secure energy exports, tourism, investment and infrastructure.

The missile issue is inseparable from nuclear concerns. Even if a nuclear agreement limits fissile material, Iran's ballistic missiles and drones remain a source of anxiety for Israel and Gulf states. Iran argues that missiles are necessary because its conventional air power is weaker than that of its adversaries. Western and regional actors argue that missiles could become delivery systems if Iran ever weaponizes. Future diplomacy may therefore face pressure to address missiles, though Iran may resist including them in nuclear talks.

Proxy conflicts intensify regional fear. Hezbollah in Lebanon, armed groups in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, Palestinian militant groups and Syria-related networks are part of the broader Iran–Israel and Iran–U.S. security competition. These groups can trigger escalation even when states do not want full war. A nuclear crisis involving Iran would become more dangerous if proxy fronts also activate. This creates *multi-front escalation risk*.

Maritime security is another concern. The Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb are vital for energy and trade. Any conflict over Iran's nuclear programme could affect tankers, insurance, port

operations and shipping routes. Mines, drones, missiles, seizures of vessels and naval confrontation could disrupt global markets. Thus, the nuclear issue is connected with *blue-water economic vulnerability*.

Regional security concerns also include nuclear domino effects. If Iran acquires or approaches nuclear-weapons capability, other regional powers may seek similar capabilities, external guarantees or advanced deterrent systems. This could weaken the global non-proliferation regime and produce long-term instability. West Asia, already burdened by war and mistrust, would become far more dangerous if nuclear competition spreads.

A sustainable future requires broader regional dialogue. Nuclear verification must be accompanied by channels addressing maritime security, missile restraint, non-attack understandings, crisis communication, and protection of energy infrastructure. Oman, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other actors may play roles in de-escalation. China and Russia may also influence the diplomatic environment. The United States remains indispensable because sanctions and military presence are central to the equation.

India's position should emphasize regional security without entering regional blocs. India should not support nuclear proliferation, military attacks or coercive regime-change strategies. It should support IAEA verification, Gulf de-escalation, maritime safety and diplomatic settlement. India's voice is credible because it maintains relations with Iran, Israel, Gulf states and the United States. This gives India a rare capacity for *balanced articulation*.

In conclusion, regional security concerns will determine whether the nuclear issue can be stabilized. A purely technical nuclear agreement will remain vulnerable if missiles, proxies, sanctions and maritime tensions remain uncontrolled. In refined strategic language, Iran's nuclear future is tied to a *regional security labyrinth in which every nuclear step echoes through missiles, proxies, sea lanes and oil markets*.

16.4.3 India's Interest in Stability

India's interest in stability is the guiding principle of its approach to the future of Iran's nuclear issue. India does not seek confrontation, nuclear escalation, regime collapse, sanctions chaos or regional war. India seeks a stable West Asia in which energy flows securely, Indian citizens remain safe, Chabahar functions effectively, trade routes stay open, and India can maintain relations with Iran, the United States, Israel and Gulf Arab states simultaneously.

Stability is therefore not an abstract moral preference; it is a concrete national interest.

The first reason for India's interest in stability is energy security. India depends heavily on imported oil and gas, and West Asia remains one of its most important supply regions. Any crisis involving Iran's nuclear programme can raise oil prices, threaten LNG shipments, increase insurance costs and disrupt shipping. The Strait of Hormuz is especially important because large volumes of oil and LNG pass through it. A nuclear crisis that affects Hormuz would directly affect India's economy, inflation, transport, industry and household budgets.

The second reason is diaspora safety. Millions of Indians live and work in Gulf countries and the wider West Asian region. A war involving Iran, Israel, the United States or Gulf states could endanger Indian workers, professionals, families and seafarers. India has repeatedly conducted evacuations from conflict zones in West Asia, and such operations require enormous diplomatic and logistical effort. Stability protects not only national strategy but Indian lives.

The third reason is Chabahar. India's investment in Chabahar is central to its access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. If Iran faces war, severe sanctions escalation or internal instability due to nuclear confrontation, Chabahar's operations may suffer. Shipping companies may hesitate, banks may refuse transactions, insurers may raise costs, and cargo movement may decline. Therefore, the future of Iran's nuclear issue has direct consequences for India's westward connectivity.

The fourth reason is Afghanistan and Central Asia. India needs Iran as a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia because Pakistan blocks direct land access. A destabilized Iran would weaken India's ability to reach these regions. It would also allow China and Pakistan to shape corridor politics more strongly. Stability in Iran helps India preserve *connectivity autonomy*.

The fifth reason is India's diplomatic balancing. India has strong relations with the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Iran. A nuclear crisis forces India into uncomfortable choices and exposes it to pressure from all sides. A stable diplomatic settlement gives India room to practise multi-alignment. Instability compresses diplomatic space; stability expands it.

The sixth reason is trade. Sanctions and nuclear crises reduce India–Iran trade, complicate payments, restrict insurance and discourage private-sector participation. Stability can revive energy discussions, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, tea, rice, machinery, fertilizers, petrochemicals, shipping and port-related commerce. India and Iran possess economic complementarity, but it can be realized only under predictable conditions.

The seventh reason is maritime security. India wants the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf and western Indian Ocean to remain safe for commerce. A nuclear crisis could bring naval confrontation, vessel seizures, missile threats, drone attacks or mine risks. India's Navy can protect Indian interests, but prevention is better than crisis response. Stable diplomacy is cheaper than military emergency.

India's interest in stability also reflects its identity as a responsible rising power. India seeks a larger role in global governance and cannot appear indifferent to nuclear proliferation or regional war. It must support international law, IAEA verification, peaceful settlement and non-proliferation. At the same time, India must avoid becoming a partisan actor in Western or regional confrontations. This is *responsible strategic autonomy*.

India should therefore pursue a policy of constructive engagement. It should encourage Iran to cooperate fully with the IAEA; urge the United States and Europe to offer realistic sanctions relief for verified compliance; maintain dialogue with Israel and Gulf states about regional concerns; protect Chabahar through diplomatic negotiation; and prepare contingency plans for energy and diaspora safety. India's policy should be calm, firm and interest-based.

In conclusion, India's interest in stability is comprehensive: energy, diaspora, Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, maritime security, trade and diplomacy all depend on it. India's preferred future is a verifiable nuclear settlement that prevents proliferation while avoiding war. In elevated diplomatic language, India seeks a *stable nuclear equilibrium in West Asia that protects non-proliferation, preserves Iran's constructive engagement and safeguards India's strategic access to the Gulf and Eurasia*.

Concluding Observation

The future of Iran's nuclear issue will remain uncertain, but India's position should remain clear. Negotiations are difficult but necessary; regional

security concerns are serious but manageable through diplomacy; and India's interest lies firmly in stability. A diplomatic settlement can protect energy markets, Chabahar, diaspora safety, maritime routes and India's multi-aligned foreign policy. Military escalation, by contrast, would create severe economic, security and diplomatic costs.

India should therefore continue to support Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy under safeguards, oppose nuclear proliferation, strengthen the authority of the IAEA, encourage negotiated settlement, and resist any drift toward regional war. In the broader architecture of India–Iran relations, the future nuclear issue is a *decisive test of whether diplomacy can restrain power politics and whether India can protect its interests through balanced strategic autonomy*.

Chapter 17:

Trade, Economy and Development Cooperation

Trade, economy and development cooperation form one of the most practical foundations of India–Iran relations. While civilizational memory, strategic geography and diplomatic convergence provide depth to the relationship, trade gives it material substance. India and Iran are natural economic partners because their economies possess several areas of complementarity: India has demand for energy, fertilizers, petrochemicals, dry fruits, minerals and connectivity access; Iran has demand for rice, tea, pharmaceuticals, machinery, agricultural products, medical goods, consumer items and services. In economic language, the two countries possess a strong *structural complementarity*, but in political economy, this complementarity has been restricted by sanctions, banking obstacles, shipping constraints and geopolitical pressure.

Historically, India–Iran economic relations were heavily influenced by energy. Iranian crude oil was once one of the central pillars of bilateral trade. India imported significant quantities of Iranian oil, while Iran imported Indian rice, tea, pharmaceuticals, sugar, engineering goods and other products. This created a large trade volume and a natural commercial rhythm. However, after the tightening of U.S. sanctions, especially after 2018–19, India’s crude-oil imports from Iran declined sharply, and the bilateral trade structure changed fundamentally. The relationship moved from an *energy-dominant trade pattern* to a *food-pharma-fruit-and-chemicals trade pattern*.

This decline in trade volume should not be mistaken for decline in economic importance. Iran remains highly important for India because of *Chabahar Port*, the *International North–South Transport Corridor*, access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, potential energy cooperation, petrochemicals, fertilizers, dry fruits, and wider Eurasian connectivity. Similarly, India remains important for Iran because India is a large market, a supplier of essential food items, a pharmaceutical power, a potential investor, a civilizational partner and a country capable of reducing Iran’s excessive

dependence on China. The challenge is not absence of potential; the challenge is *conversion of potential into operational commerce*.

Development cooperation between India and Iran is also connected with connectivity. Chabahar is not only a port project; it is a development instrument for Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan region, a trade opening for Afghanistan, a maritime access point for Central Asia, and a strategic-economic corridor for India. In this sense, India–Iran economic cooperation is not limited to the exchange of commodities; it includes *corridor development, regional logistics, humanitarian movement, transit trade and geoeconomic statecraft*.

Books such as Daniel Yergin's *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World*, Robert D. Kaplan's *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, and Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History* help us understand why India–Iran trade cannot be treated as ordinary commerce. Energy, ports, routes, chokepoints and continental access all transform bilateral trade into geopolitics. Iran is not only a market; it is a *gateway*. India is not only a buyer; it is a *civilizational and commercial partner with Eurasian ambitions*.

17.1 India–Iran Bilateral Trade

India–Iran bilateral trade has passed through three broad phases in the contemporary period. The first was the *energy-expansion phase*, when Iranian crude oil dominated India's imports and total trade reached high levels. The second was the *sanctions-contraction phase*, when oil imports declined sharply due to U.S. sanctions, banking restrictions and shipping-insurance problems. The third is the present *restricted-diversification phase*, in which trade continues but is limited mainly to food products, pharmaceuticals, agricultural commodities, dry fruits, chemicals and selected industrial inputs.

The sharp decline in bilateral trade after 2018–19 was primarily caused by the collapse of oil trade. When Iranian crude imports were active, India's imports from Iran were much larger than exports to Iran, creating a trade pattern in Iran's favour. Once oil imports stopped or sharply declined, the balance changed. India began exporting more to Iran than it imported. Thus, the trade balance shifted from energy-driven Iranian surplus to non-oil Indian surplus. This shift reveals how deeply sanctions transformed the economic structure of India–Iran relations.

The present bilateral trade is modest when compared with the potential of the two economies. India is one of the world's largest economies and a major importer of energy, fertilizers and raw materials. Iran is a resource-rich country with a strategic location, a large educated population and a strong industrial base in energy, petrochemicals and minerals. A trade volume of around one to two billion dollars is far below what the relationship could achieve under normal conditions. This is why India–Iran trade may be described as *under-realized commerce under geopolitical constraint*.

The official trade pattern shows India's exports to Iran remaining larger than imports in recent years. This indicates that Iran continues to need Indian food and pharmaceutical products, while India's imports from Iran remain restricted because oil and gas are largely blocked by sanctions. In normal circumstances, the trade basket would likely include much higher volumes of crude oil, petrochemicals, fertilizers, minerals and industrial goods from Iran, while India would export rice, tea, medicines, machinery, engineering goods, textiles and services.

India–Iran bilateral trade also carries a humanitarian dimension. Indian rice, tea, medicines and agricultural products are not only commercial items; they contribute to Iran's food and health requirements. Pharmaceuticals are particularly important because India is known globally as a supplier of affordable medicines. Even during sanctions periods, food and medicines are often treated differently from strategic goods, though banking problems still create obstacles. Thus, India's exports to Iran support both commerce and social welfare.

Trade with Iran is also important for Indian farmers and exporters. Basmati rice exporters, tea producers, pharmaceutical companies, sugar exporters, fruit traders, pulses suppliers and small business houses have long looked at Iran as a valuable market. Disruptions in Iran trade affect not only large companies but also agricultural communities and export-linked workers in India. Therefore, India–Iran trade has domestic economic relevance.

Banking remains one of the greatest obstacles. Even when goods are legally tradable, payment channels may be difficult. Banks fear exposure to U.S. sanctions, Iranian currency volatility, delayed payments and compliance risks. Exporters may hesitate to send shipments if they are unsure whether payment will arrive. This creates a problem of *commercial uncertainty*. Trade requires trust, and sanctions disturb that trust.

Shipping and insurance are also major issues. Trade with Iran requires vessels, ports, documentation, insurance, customs coordination and financial settlement. If shipping companies or insurers fear sanctions, the cost of trade increases. If regional conflict raises freight or insurance rates, trade becomes less competitive. This is why Iran–Israel tensions, Strait of Hormuz risks and U.S. sanctions directly affect India–Iran commerce.

Chabahar can improve trade if properly developed. It can provide a stable maritime-commercial platform for India–Iran trade and onward movement to Afghanistan and Central Asia. If Chabahar is linked with warehousing, customs modernization, multimodal transport, banking arrangements and commercial incentives, it can become a *trade multiplier*. However, Chabahar cannot by itself overcome sanctions; it must be supported by diplomatic negotiation, logistics efficiency and private-sector confidence.

In conclusion, India–Iran bilateral trade is presently limited but strategically important. Its value lies not only in its current volume but in its future potential. In elevated economic language, India–Iran trade is a *compressed commercial relationship awaiting geopolitical release*.

17.1.1 Major Indian Exports to Iran

Major Indian exports to Iran include *basmati rice, tea, sugar, fresh fruits, pharmaceuticals, medical products, agricultural commodities, pulses, processed food items, soft drinks, engineering goods, man-made fibres, chemicals* and selected consumer products. Among these, basmati rice and pharmaceuticals occupy a particularly important place. They represent two different strengths of India: agricultural excellence and pharmaceutical capability.

Basmati rice is one of India's most important exports to Iran. Iran has long been a major market for Indian basmati because rice forms an important part of Iranian food culture. Indian basmati is valued for its aroma, grain length, cooking quality and suitability for Persian cuisine. The export of basmati rice to Iran connects Indian farmers, millers, exporters, shipping firms and Iranian consumers in a single commercial chain. It is a classic example of *agro-commercial diplomacy*.

However, rice exports to Iran are vulnerable to payment uncertainty and policy changes. Iranian importers may face currency problems, subsidy changes, banking restrictions or sanctions-related difficulty. Indian exporters

may worry about delayed payments, blocked transactions and shipment risks. Therefore, while rice remains a strong export item, its stability depends on financial mechanisms. Without credible payment systems, even high demand cannot automatically become reliable trade.

Tea is another important Indian export to Iran. Iranian consumers have a long tradition of tea drinking, and Indian tea—especially orthodox tea from Assam, Darjeeling and other regions—has a respected place in the market. Tea trade reflects not only commerce but cultural affinity because both India and Iran have deep social traditions of hospitality and tea consumption. In this sense, tea becomes a *civilizational commodity*, carrying taste, habit and history.

Pharmaceuticals are a crucial Indian export because India is a global producer of affordable generic medicines. Iran's health sector requires medicines, active pharmaceutical ingredients, medical supplies and health-related products. Indian pharmaceutical exports can serve humanitarian and commercial purposes simultaneously. In sanctions-affected economies, affordable medicines become even more important. India's pharmaceutical capability gives it a significant role in Iran's health security.

Sugar and agricultural commodities also form part of the export basket. Iran's food imports are affected by domestic production, climate, currency conditions and subsidy policies. India, as a large agricultural economy, can supply sugar, pulses, oil meals, animal feed ingredients and processed products according to demand. These exports strengthen India's position as a *food-security partner*.

Fresh fruits and processed foods from India also enter the Iranian market, though the trade is not as large as rice or tea. Mangoes, bananas, spices, processed foods and beverages can expand if cold-chain logistics, certification standards and distribution networks improve. There is scope for India to develop higher-value food exports rather than relying only on bulk commodities.

Engineering goods and machinery have potential but remain constrained. Iran needs machinery, industrial parts, transport equipment, electrical goods and manufacturing inputs. India has the capacity to export these products, but sanctions and banking difficulties reduce confidence. If trade conditions

improve, engineering goods can become an important part of the export basket. This would diversify India's exports beyond food and medicine.

India's exports to Iran also have political significance. Since India's imports from Iran declined after oil sanctions, exports became the main pillar of bilateral trade. This created a trade surplus for India. However, India should not view the surplus only as a commercial advantage; it should also understand Iran's need for balanced trade. A sustainable economic relationship requires two-way benefit. If Iran cannot export enough to India, it may lose enthusiasm for expanding imports from India.

In conclusion, major Indian exports to Iran show India's strength in agriculture, food products, pharmaceuticals and selected industrial goods. The future lies in diversification toward medicines, engineering goods, health technology, agro-processing, digital services and logistics. In refined trade language, Indian exports to Iran represent a *food-pharma-commercial bridge between India's productive capacity and Iran's consumer and social needs*.

17.1.2 Major Indian Imports From Iran

Major Indian imports from Iran have changed dramatically over time. Historically, crude oil was the dominant Indian import from Iran. Iranian oil supplied Indian refineries and gave the bilateral trade relationship substantial volume. However, after sanctions intensified and India halted formal oil imports, the import basket shifted toward smaller non-oil items such as *dry fruits, fresh fruits, pistachios, dates, apples, kiwi, almonds, chemicals, methanol, bitumen* and selected industrial inputs. This shift from oil to non-oil imports is the most important transformation in India–Iran trade.

Iranian crude oil once made Iran one of India's major energy partners. Iran's geographical proximity, crude quality and commercial terms made it attractive. Indian refineries were familiar with Iranian crude. Energy trade also gave the relationship strategic depth because oil creates regular high-value transactions and long-term interdependence. When oil trade declined, the entire economic relationship became smaller. This demonstrates that energy was the *heavy pillar* of India–Iran commerce.

Today, non-oil imports from Iran are much more modest. Dry fruits and fresh fruits are important because Iran is known for high-quality pistachios, dates, apples, kiwi, almonds and other agricultural products. These goods have strong demand in India due to rising incomes, dietary diversification, food

processing and festive consumption. Iran's agricultural exports can find a natural market in India if logistics and payment systems are efficient.

Dates and pistachios have special importance. Iran is one of the world's known producers of these products. India's large population and growing middle class create strong demand for dry fruits. These imports are commercially useful and culturally familiar. However, they cannot replace the value of crude oil imports. They help sustain trade but do not restore the earlier scale of bilateral commerce.

Chemicals, methanol and bitumen also form part of the import basket. Iran's petrochemical sector has considerable capacity because of its hydrocarbon resources. Methanol can be used in chemicals and industry, while bitumen is relevant for road construction and infrastructure. These items show that even without crude oil, Iran can supply India with industrial inputs. However, sanctions and shipping constraints limit expansion.

Fertilizers and petrochemicals have significant potential. India has high demand for fertilizers due to its agricultural needs. Iran's energy and petrochemical resources could support fertilizer cooperation. If sanctions conditions improve, India could import more urea, ammonia-related products, petrochemical feedstocks and industrial chemicals from Iran. This would create a more balanced trade basket.

India may also explore mineral and metal imports from Iran. Iran has resources such as iron ore, copper, zinc and other minerals. India's infrastructure and manufacturing growth require raw materials. However, sanctions, logistics, investment restrictions and payment difficulties prevent full development of this potential. Under improved conditions, minerals could become part of a broader economic partnership.

Energy remains the largest future possibility. If sanctions are eased or a stable legal mechanism emerges, India may consider reviving oil imports from Iran. This would restore volume to bilateral trade and provide India with supplier diversification. However, any revival will depend on compliance clarity, banking channels, shipping insurance, refinery economics, and India's broader relations with the United States and Gulf suppliers. Energy revival requires *legal certainty and diplomatic confidence*.

India should also consider that imports from Iran are important for balanced trade. If India only exports to Iran but imports very little, the relationship may

become commercially uneven. Iran needs export revenue and market access. India needs to show that it sees Iran not only as a buyer of Indian goods but also as a supplier. Balanced trade creates political goodwill.

In conclusion, Indian imports from Iran have moved from oil dominance to modest non-oil trade. Dry fruits, fresh fruits, chemicals and industrial inputs now form the visible basket, while oil, gas, fertilizers, petrochemicals and minerals remain future possibilities. In elevated economic language, India's imports from Iran represent a *diminished but potentially expandable corridor of resource complementarity*.

17.1.3 Trade Balance and Economic Potential

The trade balance between India and Iran has changed fundamentally due to sanctions. When India imported large quantities of Iranian crude oil, the trade balance was in Iran's favour. After oil imports declined, India's exports became larger than its imports, producing a trade surplus for India. This change is not the result of normal market evolution alone; it is primarily the result of geopolitical restriction. Therefore, India–Iran trade balance must be understood as a *sanctions-shaped balance*, not a purely economic balance.

In recent years, India's exports to Iran have remained around the level of one to one-and-a-half billion dollars annually, while imports have remained lower. This has given India a visible surplus. However, a trade surplus in a shrinking trade relationship is not necessarily a sign of economic strength. A small surplus in a small trade relationship may be less valuable than a balanced relationship with larger volume. India and Iran should therefore aim not merely to preserve India's surplus but to expand total trade.

The economic potential is much larger than current trade figures suggest. India and Iran can cooperate in energy, petrochemicals, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, food processing, ports, shipping, logistics, railways, road transport, information technology, digital services, education, healthcare, tourism, mining, renewable energy and small industry. The challenge is not identification of sectors; the challenge is creation of conditions for trade to flourish. These conditions include banking channels, insurance, shipping confidence, sanctions clarity, customs facilitation, standards alignment and business-to-business contact.

Energy remains the largest unrealized potential. Iran has vast oil and gas reserves, while India has large and growing energy demand. Under normal

conditions, Iran could again become a useful oil supplier for India and a possible partner in gas, petrochemicals and fertilizers. Energy cooperation would strengthen India's diversification and give Iran a reliable market. However, sanctions remain the decisive barrier. Until the sanctions environment changes, energy potential will remain largely theoretical.

Pharmaceuticals offer strong realistic potential because Indian medicines are affordable and globally competitive. Iran's health sector can benefit from Indian generics, active pharmaceutical ingredients, hospital equipment, medical technology and telemedicine. This sector is less politically sensitive than oil and defence, though payment channels still matter. India can become a *health-security partner* for Iran if financial systems are stabilized.

Agriculture and food trade also have strong potential. India can export rice, tea, sugar, pulses, spices, processed foods and agricultural machinery. Iran can export dry fruits, fruits, saffron-related products, nuts and agro-based goods. Joint ventures in food processing, cold chains, warehousing and certification can improve trade quality. Food security is a non-controversial area where India and Iran can deepen cooperation despite political constraints.

Chabahar can become a major multiplier of economic potential. If the port develops into a reliable logistics hub, India–Iran trade can expand beyond bilateral exchange into transit trade. Indian goods can move through Iran to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia. Iranian goods can access Indian markets and onward maritime routes. Central Asian states can use the corridor for access to the Indian Ocean. Thus, Chabahar can convert bilateral trade into *regional trade architecture*.

The International North–South Transport Corridor also has economic significance. It can reduce time and cost between India, Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe. If integrated with Chabahar and Iranian rail-road systems, INSTC can strengthen India's Eurasian trade. However, the corridor needs infrastructure completion, customs coordination, digital documentation, freight reliability, banking mechanisms and political stability. Corridors do not succeed by map lines; they succeed by operational efficiency.

Banking is the heart of trade expansion. India and Iran need safe, legal, predictable payment mechanisms. Rupee-rial arrangements, local-currency

settlement, barter-like mechanisms, special-purpose banking channels, and trade-finance guarantees have been discussed at different times. However, such mechanisms must be legally sound and commercially trusted. Without reliable payments, exporters and importers cannot take risk. Payment certainty is the *oxygen of trade*.

Private-sector confidence is equally important. Governments can sign agreements, but traders, exporters, shipping companies, banks and insurers must execute them. Indian exporters need protection against payment default; Iranian importers need access to foreign exchange; shipping companies need insurance; banks need compliance clarity. The future of India–Iran trade depends on whether policy can solve these operational problems.

Economic potential also includes development cooperation. India can support capacity building, skill development, IT training, medical education, agriculture technology, small enterprises and port-linked logistics in Iran. Iran can support India's access to Central Asia and Eurasia. This makes development cooperation a strategic-economic tool rather than charity. Development cooperation creates goodwill and strengthens long-term partnership.

In conclusion, the trade balance currently favours India because sanctions have reduced imports from Iran, especially oil. But the real goal should be expansion and diversification of total trade. India–Iran economic potential is high in energy, food, pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, fertilizers, Chabahar, INSTC, logistics and services. In refined geoeconomic language, the India–Iran trade relationship is a *restricted commercial partnership with expansive strategic potential waiting for financial, diplomatic and logistical unlocking*.

Concluding Observation

India–Iran trade, economy and development cooperation remain strategically significant despite reduced trade volume. The collapse of oil trade transformed the relationship, reduced bilateral commerce and shifted the balance in India's favour. Yet the underlying complementarity remains powerful. India needs energy diversification, dry fruits, petrochemicals, fertilizers and access to Eurasia. Iran needs rice, tea, pharmaceuticals, agricultural products, technology, markets and partners beyond China. Chabahar and INSTC give the relationship a regional-development dimension.

The future of India–Iran economic cooperation depends on four conditions: sanctions clarity, banking mechanisms, logistics efficiency and political commitment. If these conditions improve, trade can expand far beyond its present modest level. India and Iran must therefore treat trade not merely as buying and selling but as *geo-economic diplomacy*. In the broader framework of India–Iran relations, trade is the *material bloodstream through which civilizational friendship and strategic geography can become durable economic partnership*.

17.2 Banking and Payment Problems

Banking and payment problems constitute the most persistent and debilitating obstacle in India–Iran economic relations. Trade between two countries can survive political differences if payments are reliable, banks are willing, insurers are confident and exporters trust that money will reach them. In the India–Iran case, however, the financial channel itself has repeatedly become the weakest link. The problem is not merely that India and Iran wish to trade but cannot identify goods; the deeper problem is that even when goods exist, buyers exist and sellers exist, the *financial artery of commerce* becomes obstructed by sanctions, compliance anxiety, currency instability and banking caution.

The banking problem became acute after the intensification of U.S. and Western sanctions on Iran. Because the global financial system is heavily influenced by the U.S. dollar, American banking regulations, correspondent banking networks and sanctions-compliance systems, many banks outside the United States avoid Iran-related transactions. Even transactions that are legally permissible, such as food, medicine or agricultural commodities, often face delays because banks fear secondary sanctions, reputational damage, documentary uncertainty or future regulatory scrutiny. This is the phenomenon of *over-compliance*, in which businesses and banks avoid even lawful trade because the perceived risk is greater than the expected profit.

For India, banking difficulty directly affects exports such as *basmati rice, tea, pharmaceuticals, sugar, fresh fruits, engineering goods and medical products*. For Iran, banking difficulty affects imports of essential goods and exports of dry fruits, petrochemicals, fruits, industrial inputs and potential energy products. Thus, the banking problem damages both sides. It reduces India's access to an important market and restricts Iran's access to reliable

Indian supplies. In this sense, sanctions do not merely punish a government; they reshape the everyday structure of commercial exchange.

Payment uncertainty also damages trust among business communities. Exporters operate on thin margins and predictable schedules. If payment is delayed for months, blocked by banks, trapped in currency conversion, or exposed to sudden regulatory change, traders withdraw from the market. Importers in Iran also face problems due to currency depreciation, inflation, lack of foreign exchange, subsidy changes and domestic banking restrictions. The result is a commercial atmosphere of *hesitant engagement*, where demand exists but confidence is weak.

Banking problems also reduce the developmental value of Chabahar and INSTC. A corridor does not function only through roads, ports and ships; it requires letters of credit, settlement systems, insurance documents, freight guarantees, customs payments and investment finance. If payment channels remain uncertain, corridors remain underused. Therefore, banking cooperation is not a secondary technical matter; it is a central pillar of *geoeconomic connectivity*.

The India–Iran experience shows that economic diplomacy must include financial diplomacy. Ministries of commerce, finance, external affairs, central banks, commercial banks, export-credit agencies, insurers, shipping companies and chambers of commerce must work together. Without this coordination, trade policy remains declaratory. India and Iran need a legally safe, transparent and commercially trusted payment mechanism that satisfies compliance requirements while allowing legitimate trade to continue.

In conclusion, banking and payment problems are the *invisible sanctions frontier* of India–Iran economic relations. They do not always appear in grand strategic speeches, but they determine whether rice, medicines, fruits, machinery and port services can actually move. In refined economic language, the banking problem is the *financial chokepoint that converts political pressure into commercial paralysis*.

17.2.1 Sanctions and Payment Restrictions

Sanctions and payment restrictions are the core causes of financial difficulty between India and Iran. U.S. sanctions on Iran affect banks, oil trade, shipping, insurance, petrochemicals, metals, energy infrastructure, designated persons and financial institutions. Even when India does not agree

with the full logic of unilateral sanctions, Indian banks and companies cannot ignore their practical consequences. A bank with exposure to dollar clearing, international markets, foreign investors or compliance audits will hesitate before touching Iran-related transactions. This is the power of *extraterritorial financial deterrence*.

Payment restrictions affect trade in several ways. First, ordinary dollar transactions become difficult or impossible because banks fear U.S. penalties. Second, euro payments may also become complicated because European banks are cautious. Third, letters of credit become difficult because banks refuse to confirm them. Fourth, shipping insurance becomes expensive or unavailable. Fifth, exporters fear that payment may remain blocked in Iranian banks or intermediary accounts. Thus, sanctions do not only prohibit certain transactions; they create a climate of uncertainty around all transactions.

The oil sector has been the most affected. Earlier, Iranian crude oil imports created large payment flows from India to Iran. Once sanctions intensified and India stopped formal crude imports, the payment structure changed. Iran's rupee balances in India, which had once been used to pay for Indian exports, gradually lost their earlier strength. This weakened the old settlement logic. The collapse of oil trade therefore indirectly weakened non-oil trade because oil payments had created funds that could be used to buy Indian goods.

Payment restrictions also affect humanitarian sectors. Food, agricultural commodities, medicines and medical devices are often treated differently under sanctions frameworks, but practical banking remains difficult. A pharmaceutical exporter may still need a bank willing to process payment. A rice exporter may still need a secure settlement instrument. A medical-device supplier may still require insurance and shipping clearance. Thus, humanitarian exemptions may exist on paper, but commerce requires operational channels. This is the difference between *legal permission* and *commercial execution*.

Sanctions also create delays in due diligence. Banks must check whether Iranian counterparties are sanctioned, whether goods are permitted, whether vessels are linked with sanctioned entities, whether insurance is valid, and whether documents contain risk indicators. This increases transaction cost and discourages small exporters. Large companies may afford compliance

teams; small and medium enterprises cannot. Therefore, sanctions disproportionately harm smaller business communities.

Another difficulty is policy volatility. If sanctions rules change suddenly, businesses may be trapped mid-transaction. A shipment may leave India under one expectation and arrive under another regulatory climate. Importers may delay payment because currency rules changed. Exporters may refuse new contracts because they fear future disruption. This uncertainty reduces long-term planning and weakens investment decisions. Trade grows when rules are predictable; sanctions make rules unstable.

For India, payment restrictions also create strategic dependence on diplomatic negotiation. India has to maintain communication with the United States, Iran and international banking actors to keep legitimate trade alive. This requires a careful balance: India must avoid violating sanctions while protecting its national interest in trade, Chabahar and regional connectivity. The challenge is not only legal; it is diplomatic.

In conclusion, sanctions and payment restrictions are the principal barriers to India–Iran trade. They affect oil, food, medicine, shipping, insurance, investment and banking confidence. In elevated economic vocabulary, sanctions are the *financial architecture through which geopolitical confrontation penetrates the counting house, the port, the warehouse and the merchant's ledger*.

17.2.2 Rupee-Rial Payment Mechanism

The rupee-rial payment mechanism emerged as a practical financial workaround in a sanctions-affected environment. Its basic logic was simple but strategically important: Indian importers, especially oil companies, would deposit payments in Indian rupees into accounts linked with Iranian banks in India, and Iran would use those rupee funds to purchase Indian goods. This allowed trade to continue when dollar or euro channels were blocked or risky. It was a form of *currency-localized diplomacy*.

In practice, banks such as UCO Bank became important because they had limited exposure to the United States and were therefore considered less vulnerable to American penalties. The mechanism helped India continue some trade with Iran and allowed Indian exporters of rice, tea, pharmaceuticals and other goods to receive payment from rupee balances. It also reduced the need for third-country currency routes. For a time, the

mechanism provided a modest but useful bridge between sanctions and commerce.

The rupee-rial mechanism had several advantages. It reduced dependence on the U.S. dollar. It created a pool of funds inside India that Iran could use for imports. It supported Indian exporters. It helped sustain food and pharmaceutical trade. It gave both governments a degree of autonomy. It also demonstrated that financial innovation can preserve economic relations even under pressure. In strategic terms, it was an example of *monetary improvisation under sanctions stress*.

However, the mechanism had limitations. It worked best when India imported substantial Iranian oil, because oil payments created large rupee balances for Iran. Once Indian oil imports from Iran declined sharply after 2019, the inflow of rupees into Iranian accounts decreased. Without new large deposits, the mechanism became less powerful. This shows that a payment mechanism cannot function indefinitely without balanced trade flows. If Iran has insufficient rupee earnings, it cannot keep buying Indian goods through rupee accounts.

Another limitation was currency usability. Rupees deposited in India are useful only if Iran wants to buy Indian goods or services. If Iran wants dollars, euros, yuan or other currencies for global purchases, rupee balances are less flexible. This created frustration for Iran at times. A local-currency mechanism works best when the country receiving local currency has a large and diversified import demand from the currency-issuing country. India can supply many goods, but not everything Iran needs.

The rupee-rial mechanism also required trust among banks and businesses. Exporters needed assurance that payments would be processed quickly. Iranian importers needed clarity on documentation and approvals. Banks needed compliance safeguards. Without efficient procedures, even a useful mechanism can become slow. Therefore, the mechanism required constant administrative attention.

In the future, a renewed rupee-rial or broader local-currency mechanism may remain useful, especially for food, medicines, agricultural commodities, pharmaceuticals, education, services and selected industrial goods. However, it should be designed with better transparency, digital documentation, compliance screening, dispute resolution and trade-credit support. A

modernized mechanism should not merely repeat the older model; it should become a more sophisticated *sanctions-resilient trade settlement platform*.

India may also explore a wider architecture involving rupee trade settlement, escrow accounts, barter-like arrangements, export-credit guarantees, and possible third-country facilitation within legal limits. However, all such mechanisms must remain transparent and compliant. India's reputation as a responsible financial actor must not be compromised. Strategic autonomy must operate through legality, not opacity.

In conclusion, the rupee-rial payment mechanism has been an important instrument in India–Iran economic relations. It allowed trade to continue when normal banking channels were restricted. Yet its success depends on balanced trade, bank confidence, currency usability and legal clarity. In refined economic language, the rupee-rial mechanism is a *financial bridge built across the sanctions river; useful but dependent on the depth of trade flowing beneath it*.

17.2.3 Impact on Business Communities

The impact of banking and payment problems on business communities has been deep and practical. Indian exporters, Iranian importers, shipping companies, insurers, freight forwarders, banks, small traders, chambers of commerce and agricultural producers have all felt the consequences. Grand geopolitical disputes become real for business communities when payments are delayed, shipments are stuck, contracts are cancelled and credit dries up. Thus, sanctions and payment restrictions convert international politics into everyday commercial uncertainty.

Indian basmati rice exporters have been among the most affected. Iran has traditionally been one of the most important markets for Indian basmati rice. When payment channels become uncertain, exporters hesitate to sign contracts or dispatch shipments. Farmers and millers in Indian states such as Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and parts of western India may indirectly feel the impact because export demand influences prices. A problem in Tehran's payment system can therefore affect agricultural livelihoods in India.

Tea exporters also face uncertainty. Iran's tea market has cultural and commercial importance for India, especially for orthodox tea. If Iranian buyers cannot access foreign exchange or settlement channels, Indian tea exporters lose orders. The same applies to pharmaceutical exporters, who

may face demand but struggle with payment, documentation and banking caution. For companies dealing in essential medicines, the problem is not only commercial but humanitarian.

Small and medium enterprises suffer more than large corporations. Large companies may have legal teams, compliance departments and diversified markets. Smaller exporters often depend on one or two buyers and cannot absorb delayed payments. If a shipment is not paid for, the exporter's working capital may be trapped. This creates fear and reduces willingness to trade with Iran. The result is *risk-induced market withdrawal*.

Iranian business communities also suffer. Importers in Iran need Indian rice, tea, pharmaceuticals and other goods, but they face currency depreciation, inflation, foreign-exchange shortage, domestic controls and sanctions-related banking problems. If they cannot pay Indian exporters reliably, their reputation suffers. Iranian consumers may then face higher prices or shortages. Therefore, the problem is reciprocal.

Chambers of commerce in both countries have a major role to play. They can provide verified buyer-seller lists, legal guidance, payment-risk awareness, documentation training, arbitration mechanisms and sector-specific trade promotion. Business communities need not only political goodwill but practical support. Trade fairs, buyer-seller meets, digital platforms and commercial helpdesks can reduce uncertainty.

The impact also extends to shipping and logistics. Freight forwarders may hesitate to handle Iran-bound cargo if insurance is unclear. Shipping lines may raise freight rates. Ports may demand additional documentation. Delays increase cost and reduce competitiveness. If India wants Chabahar and India–Iran trade to grow, logistics confidence must be restored. Trade is a chain, and payment is only one link; shipping, insurance and documentation are equally important.

Business communities also experience psychological fatigue. Repeated disruptions make traders cautious. Even when conditions improve temporarily, they may not immediately return because they fear another sanctions wave or political crisis. Rebuilding confidence takes time. India–Iran commerce therefore requires sustained policy support, not occasional announcements.

In conclusion, banking and payment problems have weakened business confidence, reduced trade volumes, harmed exporters, complicated imports and discouraged investment. The business communities of both countries need clarity, protection and institutional support. In elevated language, the impact on business communities is the *human and commercial cost of financial geopolitics, borne not only by states but by farmers, exporters, importers and workers.*

17.3 Investment and Infrastructure Cooperation

Investment and infrastructure cooperation are essential for transforming India–Iran relations from ordinary trade into long-term geoeconomic partnership. Trade exchanges goods; infrastructure creates routes. Investment builds assets, generates employment, produces interdependence and gives strategic durability to diplomacy. In the India–Iran relationship, infrastructure cooperation is especially important because Iran is India’s gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian region and the International North–South Transport Corridor.

The most important infrastructure project is Chabahar. It represents India’s attempt to overcome Pakistan’s transit blockade and build a maritime-continental route through Iran. But infrastructure cooperation should not stop at ports. It must include roads, railways, logistics parks, warehouses, industrial zones, customs modernization, digital cargo tracking, energy projects, petrochemicals, fertilizers and possible special economic zones. The full promise of India–Iran cooperation lies in creating a *corridor economy*.

Infrastructure cooperation is also important for Iran’s domestic development. Iran’s Sistan and Baluchestan region, where Chabahar is located, has historically faced development challenges. Port-led development can create jobs, logistics activity, roads, warehouses, trade services and industrial clusters. If local communities benefit, the port’s security and legitimacy improve. Development and security are linked. A corridor that ignores local society remains fragile.

India’s investment strategy in Iran must be careful because of sanctions. Large Indian companies and banks may hesitate to invest in Iranian infrastructure due to compliance risk. Therefore, India’s approach must combine government-backed projects, legal clarity, risk mitigation, limited but high-impact investment, and multilateral or regional participation where

feasible. India should avoid overpromising and underdelivering. Credibility matters more than grand declarations.

Infrastructure cooperation also has strategic value vis-à-vis China. China's Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC and Gwadar have changed the regional connectivity environment. If India fails to operationalize Chabahar and related corridors, China's influence in Eurasian connectivity may expand further. India's answer must not be rhetorical opposition but *execution-oriented counter-connectivity*. India–Iran infrastructure cooperation is therefore part of a wider Asian corridor competition.

In conclusion, investment and infrastructure cooperation are the geoeconomic backbone of India–Iran relations. They can convert geography into commerce, diplomacy into logistics, and civilizational ties into material partnership. In refined language, infrastructure cooperation is the *steel, concrete and port-based expression of India–Iran strategic convergence*.

17.3.1 Ports

Ports occupy the central place in India–Iran infrastructure cooperation. Chabahar Port, particularly the Shahid Beheshti Terminal, is the flagship project. It gives India access to Iran's Gulf of Oman coast and creates a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia without passing through Pakistan. Chabahar is therefore not merely a maritime project; it is an instrument of *strategic access, regional connectivity and geoeconomic autonomy*.

Chabahar's importance lies in its location. It is situated outside the narrowest confines of the Persian Gulf, on Iran's south-eastern coast near the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. This location gives it advantages for Indian shipping. Goods from Indian ports can move to Chabahar and then onward through Iranian roads and railways toward Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond. The port thus converts India's maritime reach into continental access. It is India's *western doorway to landlocked Eurasia*.

The 2024 long-term contract for the Shahid Beheshti Terminal gave the project greater stability. Short-term arrangements had previously limited investor confidence. A long-term framework allows planning, equipment deployment, cargo promotion and commercial engagement. However, the port's success will depend on actual cargo volumes, shipping frequency, customs efficiency, tariff competitiveness and hinterland connectivity. A port becomes powerful only when traders use it regularly.

Chabahar can serve multiple purposes. It can support India–Iran bilateral trade. It can facilitate Afghanistan’s access to the sea. It can provide Central Asian republics with an alternative outlet to the Indian Ocean. It can support humanitarian shipments. It can connect with INSTC. It can also help Iran develop its eastern region. This multiplicity gives Chabahar diplomatic legitimacy. It should be presented as *inclusive connectivity*, not merely as a counter to Pakistan’s Gwadar.

However, Chabahar faces challenges. U.S. sanctions complicate banking and investment. Regional instability affects shipping and insurance. Infrastructure delays reduce confidence. Afghanistan’s political uncertainty limits transit trade. Iranian domestic administrative procedures may slow cargo movement. Indian private-sector participation remains cautious. These challenges must be addressed through coordinated policy.

India should develop a port ecosystem around Chabahar. This includes regular shipping links from Indian west-coast ports, warehousing facilities, cold storage, container handling, freight-forwarding services, digital documentation, customs cooperation, export promotion, and business outreach to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Chabahar should not remain a symbol; it must become a *working commercial machine*.

Ports also have a maritime-security dimension. Cargo safety, port security, emergency response, seafarer welfare, environmental protection and insurance confidence are important. India and Iran can cooperate in these areas without entering sensitive military arrangements. Practical port security strengthens trade and reassures businesses.

In conclusion, ports are the most visible and strategic component of India–Iran infrastructure cooperation. Chabahar is India’s practical answer to geographical obstruction and corridor exclusion. In elevated geoeconomic vocabulary, Chabahar is the *maritime hinge through which India’s commercial imagination turns toward Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia*.

17.3.2 Railways

Railways are essential for converting port access into continental connectivity. A port without railway and road links remains limited to coastal trade; a port connected to inland transport becomes a corridor. In the India–Iran relationship, railway cooperation is important because Chabahar’s full

value depends on its ability to connect with Zahedan, Afghanistan, Mashhad, the Caspian region, Central Asia and the International North–South Transport Corridor. Railways are the *inland arteries* of geoeconomic strategy.

The Chabahar–Zahedan railway has long been discussed as a crucial link. Zahedan is important because it connects Iran’s south-eastern region with broader Iranian transport networks and with routes toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. If Chabahar is connected efficiently with Zahedan, cargo arriving from India can move inland toward Afghanistan’s Zaranj–Delaram route, Iran’s railway systems and Central Asian directions. This would enhance the port’s strategic utility.

Railway development faces several obstacles. Financing is difficult under sanctions. Technology procurement may be restricted. Construction in difficult terrain is costly. Administrative delays can slow implementation. India’s participation has at times been affected by sanctions concerns and project-level complications. Iran has also pursued some rail development through its own resources or other partners. This shows that railway cooperation requires long-term patience.

The broader INSTC railway network is equally important. The Rasht–Astara link in northern Iran has often been discussed as a missing segment in the western route of INSTC. When such railway gaps are filled, India can connect more effectively through Iran to the Caspian region, Azerbaijan, Russia and Europe. Railways therefore give India–Iran cooperation a wider Eurasian dimension. Chabahar is the southern opening; northern rail links provide the Eurasian continuation.

Railways also matter for Central Asia. Iran already has rail connections toward Turkmenistan and Central Asian networks. If India can use Iranian rail corridors effectively, it can reduce its dependence on difficult routes through Pakistan. This is especially important for trade in fertilizers, minerals, machinery, pharmaceuticals, textiles and food products. Railways reduce cost and increase reliability when properly integrated.

Railway cooperation can also support Iran’s regional development. Eastern Iran needs connectivity for industrial growth, employment and trade. Rail links from Chabahar can help develop Sistan and Baluchestan, attract logistics activity, and integrate peripheral regions with national markets. This

development dimension is important for stability. A railway is not only a track; it is a *development corridor*.

India can contribute through engineering expertise, project management, rolling stock, signalling, consultancy, training, feasibility studies, financing models and public-sector cooperation. However, any involvement must be protected from sanctions risk. India should focus on legally viable, high-impact, commercially practical segments rather than spreading commitments too thinly.

Railway cooperation must also be linked with customs and digital systems. Cargo delays often occur not only because tracks are missing but because documentation, inspections, standards and border procedures are slow. Therefore, rail connectivity must be accompanied by logistics governance. A modern corridor requires *hard infrastructure* and *soft infrastructure* together.

In conclusion, railways are indispensable for India–Iran connectivity. They transform Chabahar from a port into a continental gateway and connect India with Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. In refined strategic language, railway cooperation is the *iron pathway through which India–Iran maritime access acquires Eurasian depth*.

17.3.3 Industrial and Energy Projects

Industrial and energy projects represent a major but underdeveloped area of India–Iran cooperation. Iran possesses vast oil and gas resources, petrochemical capacity, minerals, industrial zones and a strategically located domestic market. India possesses large demand, industrial expertise, pharmaceuticals, engineering capability, IT services, refinery experience, fertilizer demand and project-management capacity. Together, these strengths create significant potential. Yet sanctions have prevented the relationship from achieving its natural scale.

Energy projects historically occupied the centre of India–Iran economic imagination. Iranian crude oil supplied India for many years, and discussions on gas pipelines, LNG, upstream investment, petrochemicals and refinery cooperation appeared repeatedly. The Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline, though never realized, reflected the ambition of connecting Iranian gas with Indian demand. Its failure showed how security, sanctions, pricing and Pakistan transit concerns can defeat even economically rational projects.

Fertilizers offer a promising area. India has large agricultural requirements and imports significant fertilizer inputs. Iran's natural gas resources can support fertilizer production. Joint ventures in urea, ammonia, methanol and petrochemicals could benefit both sides if sanctions conditions permit. Fertilizer cooperation would connect Iranian energy resources with Indian food security. This is a powerful example of *energy-to-agriculture linkage*.

Petrochemicals are another important sector. Iran has feedstock advantages because of its hydrocarbon base. India has a large and growing market for chemicals, plastics, industrial inputs and petrochemical products. Joint production, long-term supply contracts, technology exchange and investment in petrochemical value chains could expand trade beyond crude oil. This would diversify the economic relationship.

Industrial zones linked with Chabahar can also be developed. If India and Iran create port-linked industrial clusters, they can support warehousing, packaging, agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, light manufacturing, repair services, logistics and re-export activity. Such zones can serve Iran's domestic market, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Indian exporters. Chabahar should therefore be imagined not only as a port but as an *industrial-logistics platform*.

Mining and minerals also offer potential. Iran has mineral resources, including iron ore, copper, zinc and other industrial minerals. India's infrastructure growth requires minerals and metals. Cooperation in mining, processing, equipment supply and mineral trade could become important under stable conditions. However, mining projects require long-term investment, legal protection and financial channels, all of which are difficult under sanctions.

Renewable energy and green technology may become future areas. Iran has solar and wind potential; India has major experience in solar expansion, renewable-energy policy, grid management and low-cost clean-energy deployment. Cooperation in solar parks, energy efficiency, green hydrogen research, battery systems and training could create a less sanctions-sensitive and forward-looking partnership. Renewable cooperation would add a *green geoeconomic layer* to India-Iran relations.

India must be realistic. Large energy and industrial investments in Iran will remain difficult until sanctions ease or legal certainty improves. Private

companies will not risk major capital under unclear conditions. Therefore, India should adopt a phased approach: begin with sectors less exposed to sanctions, expand technical consultations, prepare feasibility studies, and remain ready for larger projects when conditions improve. Strategic patience is essential.

In conclusion, industrial and energy projects hold immense promise but face heavy constraints. Oil, gas, fertilizers, petrochemicals, mining, renewable energy and industrial zones can transform India–Iran economic relations if legal and financial barriers are reduced. In elevated language, industrial and energy cooperation is the *latent engine of India–Iran economic partnership, powerful in potential but constrained by sanctions and geopolitical caution.*

17.4 Future Economic Opportunities

The future economic opportunities between India and Iran remain substantial despite present constraints. Trade has declined, banking is difficult, sanctions remain disruptive, and private-sector confidence is cautious. Yet the underlying economic complementarity is strong. India is a large market, a pharmaceutical power, a food supplier, a technology-services economy and a rising manufacturing base. Iran is resource-rich, strategically located, educated, industrially capable and connected to West Asia, Central Asia, the Caspian region and Eurasia. This creates a broad field of *future-oriented economic convergence.*

The most promising future sectors are pharmaceuticals, agriculture and food trade, technology and services, port logistics, health cooperation, renewable energy, petrochemicals, fertilizers, education, IT, tourism and transit trade. These sectors do not all face the same level of sanctions risk. Some, such as oil and petrochemicals, are highly sensitive. Others, such as medicines, food, education and selected services, may be more feasible if payment channels are secure. Therefore, India and Iran should pursue a *tiered economic strategy.*

Future opportunities will depend on three major enablers. The first is banking clarity. Without payment confidence, opportunities remain unrealized. The second is logistics efficiency, especially through Chabahar and INSTC. The third is political trust. If India and Iran maintain regular dialogue and avoid misunderstanding, businesses will feel more confident. Economic opportunity grows where diplomacy creates predictability.

India should also involve business chambers, export councils, state governments and sector-specific associations. Iran is not only a central-government relationship; it is a market for Indian states. Punjab and Haryana connect through basmati rice; Assam and West Bengal through tea; Gujarat and Maharashtra through ports, chemicals and pharmaceuticals; Telangana and Andhra Pradesh through pharma and agriculture; Kerala through diaspora-linked trade and maritime networks. A wider Indian economic strategy toward Iran should include subnational participation.

For Iran, India offers diversification. Iran's economy has become increasingly dependent on China under sanctions. While China is important, Iran may not want excessive dependence on one power. India offers a large market, civilizational goodwill, non-Western partnership and a route to South Asian demand. This gives India an opportunity if it acts with consistency.

In conclusion, future economic opportunities exist, but they require operational seriousness. India and Iran must move from potential to policy, from declarations to delivery, and from symbolic friendship to commercially measurable cooperation. In refined language, future opportunities are the *unharvested economic field of India–Iran relations, awaiting financial irrigation and logistical cultivation*.

17.4.1 Pharmaceuticals

Pharmaceuticals are one of the most promising areas of future India–Iran economic cooperation. India is widely recognized as a major producer of affordable generic medicines, vaccines, active pharmaceutical ingredients, medical devices and healthcare supplies. Iran, with its large population, educated medical community and sanctions-affected health sector, has a strong demand for reliable and affordable medicines. This creates a natural partnership in *health-security diplomacy*.

Indian pharmaceuticals can serve both commercial and humanitarian purposes. Medicines are not ordinary commodities; they affect public health, hospitals, chronic disease management, cancer treatment, diabetes care, cardiovascular treatment, infectious disease control and emergency medicine. In a sanctions-affected country, access to affordable medicines becomes especially important. India's pharmaceutical industry can help fill this space.

Pharmaceutical trade is also less politically controversial than oil or defence. Food and medicines are often treated differently in sanctions frameworks,

though banking still remains difficult. This makes pharmaceuticals one of the sectors where India and Iran can continue cooperation even during political tension. However, payment mechanisms, regulatory approvals, quality certification and distribution networks must be strengthened.

India can export generic medicines, APIs, vaccines, medical devices, diagnostic kits, hospital consumables, telemedicine systems and health IT solutions to Iran. Indian hospitals and medical institutions can also cooperate with Iranian institutions in training, medical education, joint research and specialized treatment. Medical tourism may become another opportunity if travel and banking conditions improve.

Joint ventures in pharmaceutical production may also be explored. Iran has its own pharmaceutical capacity and scientific talent. Indian companies could consider licensing, formulation manufacturing, API supply, technology transfer and co-production in legally permissible areas. Such cooperation would reduce Iran's import dependence and give Indian firms deeper market presence. This would be a move from trade to *industrial health partnership*.

Regulatory cooperation is essential. Medicines require approval, standards, testing, packaging, labelling, pharmacovigilance and quality assurance. India and Iran can create regulatory dialogues between health authorities, pharmaceutical councils and industry bodies. If approval processes become transparent and faster, trade can expand. Trust in quality is crucial in health trade.

Pharmaceutical cooperation can also strengthen India's soft power. India's image as the "pharmacy of the world" can be translated into goodwill in Iran. Affordable medicines create human-level impact. When patients receive lifesaving drugs, diplomacy becomes tangible. This is the deepest form of development cooperation.

In conclusion, pharmaceuticals offer a realistic, humane and strategically valuable opportunity for India–Iran cooperation. They combine India's industrial strength with Iran's health needs and avoid some of the political sensitivities of energy and defence. In elevated language, pharmaceutical cooperation is the *healing corridor through which India's scientific capacity can serve Iran's social welfare and bilateral trust*.

17.4.2 Agriculture and Food Trade

Agriculture and food trade are among the most stable and culturally resonant opportunities in India–Iran economic relations. Food is not merely a commodity; it is part of civilization, daily life, hospitality and social memory. India and Iran both possess rich culinary traditions, and their food trade reflects deep consumer familiarity. Rice, tea, sugar, fruits, dry fruits, spices, pulses and processed foods can form a resilient commercial foundation.

Basmati rice will remain central. Iran has long valued Indian basmati because of its suitability for Persian cuisine. Indian basmati exports support farmers, millers and exporters in several Indian states. However, the rice trade requires stable payments, predictable tariffs, foreign-exchange availability in Iran and shipping confidence. India should work with Iran to create secure payment guarantees, quality certification and long-term purchase arrangements. Basmati trade can become a model of *agricultural reliability*.

Tea is another promising product. Indian tea fits Iranian consumption habits and can be expanded through branding, quality segmentation and direct distribution. Iran's tea culture provides a natural market for Indian producers. Better packaging, consumer marketing, trade fairs and cooperation between tea boards and Iranian distributors could increase value. Tea trade is a soft but powerful form of commercial diplomacy.

Sugar, pulses, spices and processed foods offer further potential. Iran's domestic needs vary according to harvests, subsidies and currency conditions. India can supply according to demand. Processed foods, ready-to-cook products, spices, beverages and health foods may become more important as consumer tastes diversify. Indian food companies can use Iran as a market and as a gateway to neighbouring regions.

Iranian agricultural exports to India also have strong potential. Pistachios, dates, apples, kiwi, almonds, saffron-related products and other fruits can find large demand in India. India's growing middle class and food-processing sector increase opportunities for Iranian dry fruits and fruits. Better cold-chain logistics, direct shipping and quality certification can improve this trade. A balanced food trade benefits both sides.

Cold-chain cooperation is important. Fruits, fresh foods and high-value agricultural products require storage, refrigeration, packaging and timely transport. India and Iran can cooperate in cold storage, warehousing,

containerized shipping, quality inspection and agro-logistics. Chabahar can become a node for such trade if infrastructure improves. Food trade needs not only farms but *logistics ecosystems*.

Food security cooperation may also include agricultural machinery, irrigation technology, seeds, fertilizers, food processing, dairy technology and post-harvest management. India has experience in large-scale agriculture; Iran has experience in dryland adaptation and horticulture. Joint research and training can benefit both countries. Agriculture cooperation can thus move beyond commodity trade.

Sanctions may still create problems even for food trade because payments and shipping remain difficult. Therefore, a protected food-payment mechanism is necessary. Exporters need assurance that food trade will not be disrupted by sudden regulatory changes. Governments can support this through trade-finance windows, verified importers, dispute resolution and risk insurance.

In conclusion, agriculture and food trade offer one of the most practical and socially meaningful areas of India–Iran cooperation. Rice, tea, sugar, fruits, dry fruits, pulses and processed foods can sustain bilateral commerce even during difficult political periods. In refined economic language, food trade is the *civilizational marketplace where Indian abundance and Iranian taste meet in everyday diplomacy*.

17.4.3 Technology and Services

Technology and services represent a future-oriented area of India–Iran economic cooperation. India has strong capabilities in information technology, digital public infrastructure, software services, fintech, education technology, telemedicine, space applications, start-ups, management services, engineering consultancy and professional training. Iran has an educated population, a strong scientific tradition, capable engineers, large urban markets and demand for modernization. Together, these strengths create opportunities for *knowledge-based cooperation*.

Information technology is a promising area. Indian IT companies have global experience in software development, enterprise solutions, cybersecurity services, cloud management, digital payments, e-governance platforms, data analytics and artificial intelligence applications. Iran's economy, despite sanctions, has a growing need for digital transformation in banking,

healthcare, education, logistics, manufacturing and public services. Indian expertise can be useful if sanctions-compliant channels are available.

Digital public infrastructure is another area of potential dialogue. India's experience with digital identity, digital payments, direct-benefit systems, public digital platforms and low-cost digital governance has attracted global attention. Iran may study aspects of India's digital transformation, though political and regulatory systems differ. Cooperation can occur through training, workshops, academic exchange and technology consultancy.

Education and training services are also important. Iranian students and professionals may benefit from Indian institutions in medicine, engineering, management, IT, pharmaceuticals, agriculture and English-language education. India can offer scholarships, professional training, online courses and technical programmes. Educational cooperation creates long-term goodwill and professional networks. It is a form of *human-capital diplomacy*.

Healthcare services and telemedicine can expand. Indian hospitals, diagnostic centres and telehealth companies can cooperate with Iranian medical institutions. Medical tourism, specialized treatment, hospital management, digital diagnostics and remote consultation can become areas of growth. Pharmaceutical trade and health services can reinforce each other.

Engineering and consultancy services are relevant for infrastructure. Indian public and private companies have experience in roads, railways, ports, power, telecom, water management, renewable energy and project management. Iran's infrastructure needs are significant. Although sanctions restrict large contracts, consultancy, feasibility studies, training and technical advisory services may be more feasible. These services can prepare the ground for future investment.

Tourism and cultural services also offer potential. India and Iran share civilizational links through Persian language, Sufism, architecture, literature, cinema, cuisine and historical memory. Religious tourism, cultural tourism, medical tourism and academic tourism can expand if visa, banking and connectivity improve. Culture can become an economic sector.

Technology cooperation must be handled carefully because some high-tech sectors may face sanctions restrictions, dual-use concerns or export-control issues. Cybersecurity, telecom, advanced electronics and certain software applications may be sensitive. India should therefore focus on civilian,

developmental and transparent sectors. The guiding principle should be *technology for development, not technology for strategic opacity*.

Services trade also requires payment channels. IT services, consultancy and education cannot expand if payments are blocked. Digital contracts require legal recognition, taxation clarity, data rules and banking settlement. Therefore, technology cooperation must be linked with financial architecture.

In conclusion, technology and services can add a modern dimension to India–Iran economic relations. They can move the relationship beyond oil, rice and dry fruits toward knowledge, skills, digital systems, healthcare and education. In elevated economic language, technology and services are the *intellectual corridor through which India and Iran can convert civilizational affinity into twenty-first-century developmental partnership*.

Concluding Observation

Banking, investment, infrastructure and future economic opportunities are central to the next phase of India–Iran relations. Banking problems remain the greatest immediate obstacle. Sanctions and payment restrictions weaken trade; the rupee-rial mechanism provides partial relief but requires modernization; business communities need confidence, protection and predictability. Investment and infrastructure cooperation, especially through Chabahar, railways, industrial zones and energy projects, can transform the relationship if financial constraints ease.

The future opportunities are substantial. Pharmaceuticals, agriculture, food trade, technology and services can provide realistic growth even when oil trade remains constrained. India and Iran must therefore develop a layered economic strategy: protect feasible trade, prepare future investment, strengthen Chabahar, improve payment systems, and expand non-oil sectors. In the grand architecture of India–Iran relations, economic cooperation must become *sanctions-resilient, corridor-driven, development-oriented and strategically patient*.

Chapter 18:

Cultural Diplomacy and People-to-People Relations

India–Iran relations possess a depth that cannot be measured only by treaties, ports, oil, sanctions, corridors or strategic calculations. Beneath the visible architecture of diplomacy lies a much older and subtler foundation: *civilizational intimacy*. India and Iran are not merely two modern states interacting through embassies; they are two ancient cultural worlds that have conversed for millennia through language, poetry, trade, religion, migration, art, architecture, philosophy, music, food, mysticism and courtly imagination. Their relationship is therefore not only geopolitical but also *civilizationally sedimented*.

Cultural diplomacy between India and Iran has a special quality because it does not begin from artificial state-sponsored friendship. It rests upon historical memories already embedded in both societies. Persian words live in Indian languages; Indian images live in Persian imagination; Sufi traditions crossed frontiers; merchants sailed across the Arabian Sea; scholars moved between courts and madrasas; calligraphers, poets, physicians, architects and musicians shaped each other's cultural worlds. This produced a composite Indo-Persian civilization whose traces remain visible in Indian literature, architecture, music, cuisine, etiquette, administrative vocabulary, manuscript culture and aesthetic sensibility.

People-to-people relations are equally important. Diplomacy is often conducted by governments, but civilizational relations are sustained by people—students, scholars, pilgrims, traders, artists, tourists, translators, teachers, spiritual seekers, film-makers, artisans, musicians and families. When political relations face pressure because of sanctions, energy disruption or great-power rivalry, cultural and people-to-people relations function as a *civilizational safety valve*. They prevent temporary strategic tension from becoming permanent social alienation.

India's cultural diplomacy with Iran must therefore be understood as a form of *soft power*, but the phrase “soft power” alone is insufficient. In the Indo-

Iranian context, culture is not merely a tool of attraction; it is a shared historical inheritance. Joseph Nye's idea of *soft power* helps explain how culture can create influence, but the Indo-Iranian relationship goes beyond influence into the realm of *shared memory*. Persia did not simply influence India from outside; Persianate culture became part of India's own historical personality. Similarly, Indian spirituality, trade, literature and philosophical traditions shaped Iranian perceptions of India.

This chapter examines the cultural foundations of India–Iran relations, beginning with Persian influence on Indian culture, literature and language, and art, architecture and music. These themes show that India–Iran relations possess a *cultural infrastructure* as important as roads, ports or railways. If Chabahar is a maritime gateway, Persianate culture is a historical gateway. If INSTC connects territories, literature connects minds. If trade links markets, music and poetry link emotions.

18.1 Cultural Relations

Cultural relations between India and Iran are among the oldest and most enduring components of their bilateral engagement. These relations predate modern diplomacy and even medieval empires. The Indo-Iranian cultural world emerged from deep linguistic, religious and social affinities among ancient peoples, later enriched by trade, migration, Islamic civilization, Sufi networks, Persianate courts, Mughal patronage, manuscript circulation and artistic exchange. The result was not a one-sided influence but a long process of *reciprocal cultural fertilization*.

The term *Indo-Persian culture* refers to the composite civilization that developed when Persian language, Iranian aesthetics, Central Asian courtly manners, Islamic scholarship and Indian social creativity interacted in the subcontinent. This culture was not foreign to India in a simple sense. Over centuries, it became deeply Indianized. Persian became a language of administration, poetry, high culture and diplomacy in large parts of India. Indian poets wrote in Persian; Indian rulers patronized Persian scholars; Indian musicians absorbed Persian forms; Indian architects adapted Persian and Central Asian designs to local materials, climate and symbolism.

Cultural relations also created a vocabulary of refinement. Words connected with administration, literature, etiquette, food, textiles, architecture, music and everyday speech entered Indian languages through Persian and related

channels. Terms such as *darbar*, *diwan*, *khazana*, * *daftar**, *bazaar*, *nawab*, *shahar*, *rang*, *gul*, *dost*, *mehfil*, *adaab*, *khushboo* and many others became part of the Indian linguistic atmosphere. Language became a carrier of history.

Religion and spirituality also strengthened cultural bonds. Sufism played a central role in bringing Persian poetic and mystical thought into Indian social life. Sufi khanqahs, dargahs and literary circles became spaces where Persian metaphysics, Indian devotional sensibilities and local languages interacted. The Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri and other orders helped build a spiritual bridge across communities. This created a form of *mystical cosmopolitanism* in which poetry, music and devotion transcended political boundaries.

Cultural relations also survived political changes. Dynasties rose and fell; colonial rule replaced Persian with English in administration; modern nationalism created new borders; Iran underwent revolution; India became a republic; yet cultural memory continued. Persian departments in Indian universities, Iran Culture House in New Delhi, Indian cultural activities in Tehran, translations of poetry, academic conferences, manuscript studies, film festivals, calligraphy exhibitions and Nowruz celebrations all continue this tradition.

For India–Iran diplomacy, cultural relations provide emotional resilience. Even when trade declines because of sanctions or oil imports stop because of geopolitical pressure, cultural affinity remains. This is why the India–Iran relationship does not collapse easily. It is protected by what may be called *civilizational ballast*. Culture gives depth to diplomacy and prevents the relationship from becoming purely transactional.

In conclusion, India–Iran cultural relations represent one of the richest examples of civilizational interaction in Asia. They show that diplomacy is strongest when it is rooted in history, language, art and people. In refined language, India–Iran cultural relations are the *civilizational substratum upon which political friendship and strategic cooperation can safely rest*.

18.1.1 Persian Influence on Indian Culture

Persian influence on Indian culture is one of the most profound cultural processes in South Asian history. It entered India through many routes: ancient Indo-Iranian affinities, Achaemenid contact, trade across land and sea, Central Asian migrations, Islamic courts, Sufi saints, Persian-speaking

scholars, Mughal patronage, administrative systems, poetry, architecture, music and etiquette. Over centuries, Persian culture did not remain an external element; it merged with Indian social creativity and produced a refined Indo-Persian synthesis.

The influence began at the level of language and administration. Persian became the language of power, record-keeping, diplomacy, revenue, historiography and elite culture in many Indian courts, especially from the Delhi Sultanate through the Mughal period. Administrative terms entered Indian political life and shaped the vocabulary of governance. The Persianate court introduced concepts of protocol, documentation, royal titulature, fiscal management and courtly ceremony. This created a bureaucratic culture marked by *literary elegance and administrative precision*.

Persian influence also shaped Indian etiquette and social refinement. The culture of *adab*, polite speech, refined manners, courtly restraint, poetry gatherings, formal greetings and aesthetic conversation became part of elite Indian society. The *mehfil* became a space where poetry, music, conversation and social dignity converged. Even today, forms of greeting, poetic expression and ceremonial language in India carry traces of Persian refinement.

Food culture also absorbed Persian influence. The culinary worlds of biryani, pulao, kebabs, qorma, naan, sherbet, falooda, dried fruits, saffron, rose water and aromatic rice preparations carry Indo-Persian and Central Asian connections. Indian cuisine did not merely receive these elements; it transformed them through local spices, regional ingredients and social traditions. Thus, food became a delicious example of *civilizational fusion*.

Dress and textile culture were also influenced. Courtly robes, brocades, carpets, shawls, embroidery, turban styles, jewellery patterns and textile vocabulary reveal Persianate influences. Indian artisans absorbed designs, motifs and techniques and adapted them to local tastes. This produced a rich world of textile aesthetics, especially in Mughal, Deccani and northern Indian contexts.

Persian influence extended into historical writing. Indian courts produced chronicles, memoirs, biographies, travelogues and administrative manuals in Persian. Works such as *Akbarnama*, *Ain-i-Akbari*, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* and many regional histories show the importance of Persian as a language of

historical consciousness. Through Persian historiography, Indian political events entered a wider Islamic and Asian intellectual world.

The influence was also visible in medicine and scholarship. Unani medicine, transmitted through Persian and Arabic intellectual traditions, became a major medical system in India. Scholars translated, copied and commented upon texts in philosophy, astronomy, medicine, ethics, theology and literature. Persian became a bridge between India and wider intellectual circuits stretching from Iran to Central Asia and the Ottoman world.

Yet Persian influence in India should not be understood as cultural domination. It was transformed by Indian society. Persian in India became Indian Persian; Mughal art became Indo-Persian; Sufi poetry entered local languages; Persian vocabulary enriched Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Kashmiri, Gujarati and other languages in varying degrees. India did not merely receive Persian culture; it re-created it. This is why the Indo-Persian world was not a copy of Iran but a distinctive civilization of its own.

In conclusion, Persian influence on Indian culture was deep, elegant and transformative. It touched language, administration, food, dress, etiquette, historiography, medicine, spirituality and aesthetics. In elevated cultural vocabulary, Persian influence became the *fragrant cultural current that flowed into India's civilizational river and enriched its colour, rhythm and refinement*.

18.1.2 Literature and Language

Literature and language form the most luminous domain of Indo-Iranian cultural relations. Persian was not only a foreign court language in India; it became a major literary language of the subcontinent. Indian poets, historians, scholars, mystics and rulers wrote in Persian with extraordinary skill. The Indian subcontinent became one of the greatest centres of Persian literary production outside Iran, and in some periods, its Persian literary output was astonishingly large. This makes India not a peripheral region of Persian literature, but one of its grand historical homes.

The arrival and expansion of Persian created a literary cosmopolis. Persian connected Indian courts and scholars with a larger cultural world stretching across Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Ottoman domains. A scholar trained in Persian could move across courts, read shared texts, correspond with distant patrons and participate in a transregional intellectual order.

Persian therefore functioned as a *cosmopolitan language of culture and power*.

Amīr Khusrow stands as one of the greatest symbols of Indo-Persian literary synthesis. He was a poet, musician, historian and cultural innovator whose works reflect the meeting of Persian literary sophistication and Indian sensibility. Khusrow's genius lies not only in his Persian poetry but in his role as a bridge between languages, traditions and musical worlds. He represents the Indo-Persian spirit in its most creative form: rooted in India, expressive in Persian, and open to cultural fusion.

Persian literature in India also included court chronicles, mystical poetry, romances, ethical works, philosophical writings, dictionaries, biographies and letters. Mughal courts patronized enormous literary activity. Akbar's court encouraged translation, intellectual debate and historical writing. Persian became the medium through which Sanskrit, Islamic, Central Asian and regional Indian ideas interacted. The translation of Indian texts into Persian expanded the intellectual conversation between traditions.

Language contact produced Urdu, one of the most important cultural outcomes of Indo-Persian interaction. Urdu developed through contact among Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Hindavi, local Prakrit-derived languages and the everyday speech of North India. Persian gave Urdu much of its poetic vocabulary, metaphorical elegance and literary refinement. Urdu ghazal, in particular, carries Persian imagery of the *gul*, *bulbul*, *saaqi*, *mai*, *hijr*, *vasl*, *ishq* and *fana*. Yet Urdu became an Indian language with its own emotional world.

Persian also influenced Hindi and other Indian languages. Many Persian-origin words entered everyday speech and became so naturalized that speakers often no longer perceive them as foreign. This linguistic absorption is a sign of cultural intimacy. Words migrated from courts to bazaars, from manuscripts to songs, from official records to household speech. Language became the most democratic carrier of Indo-Persian contact.

Literary exchange also operated through Sufism. Persian Sufi poetry by Rumi, Hafez, Saadi, Attar and Jami deeply influenced Indian mystical and literary circles. Their ideas of love, annihilation of ego, divine beauty, spiritual longing and ethical refinement resonated with Indian devotional traditions. The ghazal, masnavi and qasida became important literary forms.

Persian poetry created a metaphysical vocabulary through which spiritual experience could be expressed with delicacy.

Manuscript culture was another important bridge. Libraries in India preserved Persian manuscripts in poetry, history, medicine, astronomy, theology and philosophy. Calligraphers, illuminators, binders and scribes created manuscripts as objects of art. The manuscript was not merely a text; it was a visual and intellectual artefact. Indo-Persian manuscript culture united language, calligraphy, painting and scholarship into one refined tradition.

In modern times, Persian studies continue in Indian universities, research centres, archives and cultural institutions. Departments of Persian in Delhi, Aligarh, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Patna, Kashmir and other centres preserve this legacy. Iran Culture House and Indian cultural institutions continue to support language learning, seminars, literary events, translation projects and academic exchange. This is cultural diplomacy at the level of scholarship.

In conclusion, literature and language are the golden bridge of India–Iran cultural relations. Persian enriched Indian languages, Indian writers enriched Persian literature, and the Indo-Persian tradition created one of the most refined literary cultures of Asia. In elevated language, Indo-Persian literature is the *civilizational library in which India and Iran read each other's soul*.

18.1.3 Art, Architecture and Music

Art, architecture and music reveal the aesthetic grandeur of India–Iran cultural relations. If language expresses thought, art expresses vision; if literature preserves memory, architecture materializes it; if diplomacy speaks through documents, music speaks through emotion. The Indo-Persian world produced a visual and sonic civilization whose monuments, paintings, gardens, calligraphy and musical forms remain among the most beautiful achievements of Indian history.

Architecture is the most visible domain of Persian influence. The Delhi Sultanate, regional Indo-Islamic kingdoms, the Deccan sultanates and especially the Mughal Empire absorbed Persian, Central Asian and Indian architectural elements. Features such as domes, iwans, arches, vaulted chambers, minarets, geometric gardens, water channels, calligraphy, glazed tiles, pietra dura, symmetry and charbagh planning became important components of Indian architectural aesthetics. These features did not remain

unchanged; they were adapted to Indian climate, stone, craftsmanship and symbolic worlds.

Humayun's Tomb in Delhi is one of the most significant examples of Indo-Persian architectural synthesis. It brought together Persian and Indian craftsmen and established the garden-tomb tradition on a grand scale. Its charbagh layout, water channels, high platform, red sandstone and white marble elements created a model for later Mughal architecture. The Taj Mahal, though uniquely Indian in its emotional and artistic perfection, stands within the larger Indo-Persian and Timurid-Mughal architectural universe.

Mughal gardens also reflect Persian influence. The charbagh garden symbolized order, paradise, water, symmetry and imperial vision. In India, this concept was transformed through local landscapes. Kashmir's Shalimar and Nishat gardens, Agra's garden complexes and Delhi's tomb gardens show how Persian garden imagination adapted to Indian terrain. Water channels, terraces, fountains and geometric planning turned nature into disciplined beauty. The garden became a *political theology of order and paradise*.

Painting was another major field of Indo-Persian creativity. Mughal miniature painting began under strong Persian influence but soon incorporated Indian colours, local landscapes, naturalistic observation, portraiture and even European techniques. Persian painters and Indian artists worked together in Mughal ateliers. Under Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, painting became a sophisticated courtly art. The Indo-Persian miniature was not a mere imitation of Persian art; it became a new visual language of empire, nature, devotion, history and refined pleasure.

Calligraphy also served as a bridge. Persian and Arabic scripts adorned manuscripts, monuments, coins, textiles and decorative objects. Calligraphy was not only writing; it was sacred geometry and aesthetic discipline. In India, calligraphy entered architecture, manuscript illumination and decorative arts. Persian inscriptions on Indian monuments are historical documents and visual ornaments at the same time. They record power, piety, patronage and poetic taste.

Music represents a subtler but equally important field of cultural fusion. Indo-Persian contact contributed to the development of North Indian classical music, especially in courtly and Sufi contexts. Amīr Khusrow is traditionally associated with important innovations in music and with qawwali, the

powerful Sufi musical form that combines poetry, rhythm, devotion and ecstasy. Whether every musical attribution to Khusrow can be historically verified or not, his cultural image expresses a real truth: Indo-Persian civilization profoundly shaped India's musical imagination.

The ghazal is another major musical-literary form. Originating in Persian and Arabic poetic traditions and transformed in Urdu and other Indian languages, the ghazal became a central mode of emotional expression in India. It combines longing, love, metaphysics, refinement and melancholy. When sung, the ghazal becomes a meeting point of poetry and music. It is one of the most enduring cultural gifts of the Indo-Persian world.

Qawwali, too, reflects Indo-Persian spiritual aesthetics. Performed in Sufi shrines and public spaces, qawwali uses Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and other languages to express divine love, spiritual longing and ecstatic devotion. It is a form of people-to-people culture because it crosses class, region and language boundaries. Through qawwali, Persian mystical vocabulary entered popular Indian spirituality.

Instruments and musical styles also show interaction. The santoor, sitar, rabab, sarod and other instruments carry complex histories involving Persian, Central Asian and Indian elements. Courtly patronage helped refine ragas, performance traditions and musical gatherings. Persian terminology and aesthetic categories entered the musical world, while Indian melodic systems transformed external influences into distinctively Indian forms.

The decorative arts also reveal Indo-Persian exchange. Carpets, metalwork, enamel, inlay, ceramics, textiles, jewellery, bookbinding and miniature painting show overlapping patterns. Floral motifs, arabesques, cypresses, lotuses, vines, geometric borders and garden imagery moved across artistic media. Persian aesthetics gave India new visual languages; Indian artisans gave them colour, scale and local genius.

In conclusion, art, architecture and music constitute the aesthetic heart of India-Iran cultural relations. They show how civilizational contact can produce beauty beyond politics. In refined cultural language, Indo-Persian art, architecture and music are the *visible and audible splendours of a civilization created by the meeting of Iranian refinement and Indian creativity*.

Concluding Observation

Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people relations are not secondary to India–Iran geopolitics; they are its deepest foundation. Persian influence on Indian culture, the grandeur of Indo-Persian literature and language, and the shared legacy of art, architecture and music show that the two countries are connected by more than strategic necessity. They are connected by civilizational memory. This memory gives resilience to the relationship when politics becomes difficult.

India and Iran must use this cultural inheritance actively. Persian studies, manuscript preservation, translation projects, university exchanges, film festivals, music collaborations, architecture exhibitions, tourism circuits, digital archives, joint research, Sufi heritage programmes and youth exchanges can strengthen contemporary ties. In the broader framework of India–Iran relations, culture is not nostalgia; it is diplomacy with memory. It is the *soft but enduring power through which two ancient civilizations continue to recognize each other across the noise of modern geopolitics*.

18.2 Religious and Social Linkages

Religious and social linkages form one of the most sensitive and enduring dimensions of India–Iran relations. These linkages do not operate only through formal diplomacy; they live in households, shrines, seminaries, festivals, pilgrim routes, family memories, community rituals, religious scholarship, poetry, mourning traditions, ethical imagination and shared sacred geographies. Religion, in this context, should not be treated merely as a political category. It is also a form of *civilizational memory, social belonging and spiritual mobility*.

India and Iran are connected by multiple religious traditions. Ancient Zoroastrian links, the arrival of the Parsis in India, Islamic intellectual exchange, Sufi movements, Shia devotional networks, Persian theological literature and shared ethical traditions have all contributed to a rich field of spiritual contact. These ties create a deeper social foundation than ordinary diplomatic friendship. Even when states disagree over political issues, communities continue to remember each other through devotion, pilgrimage, scholarship and inherited cultural forms.

The Shia dimension is especially important because Iran is the largest Shia-majority state, while India has one of the world's significant Shia communities. Indian Shia centres such as Lucknow, Hyderabad, Kashmir, Kargil, Amroha, Jaunpur, Barabanki, Muzaffarnagar and parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana have preserved rituals, poetry, majlis traditions, mourning practices, theological learning and shrine culture that connect emotionally with the wider Shia world. These connections are not necessarily political in a narrow sense; they are primarily *devotional and cultural linkages*.

At the same time, India's plural society gives these religious linkages a distinctive character. Shia practices in India have often interacted with local languages, regional cultures, Hindu participation in Muharram processions in some places, Urdu marsiya literature, local music, craft traditions, tazias, imambaras and community patronage. Thus, Indian Shia culture is not a simple copy of Iranian Shia culture; it is an Indian civilizational formation with Persian, Arabic, Central Asian and local Indian elements. This makes it a unique example of *localized transnational religiosity*.

Religious and social linkages also carry diplomatic significance. They can build goodwill, support tourism, encourage scholarship, deepen community understanding and soften political mistrust. However, they must be handled carefully. Religion can also become politicized if states attempt to instrumentalize it. India's approach should therefore preserve the cultural and spiritual value of religious linkages without allowing them to become instruments of sectarian alignment or geopolitical polarization. The correct approach is *respectful cultural engagement without sectarian entanglement*.

In conclusion, religious and social linkages between India and Iran are deep, layered and socially meaningful. They connect shrines, communities, languages, rituals, histories and emotions. In elevated diplomatic language, these linkages are the *sacred and social threads through which India and Iran remain connected beyond the calculations of power politics*.

18.2.1 Shia Cultural Connections

Shia cultural connections are among the most important religious linkages between India and Iran. Iran's identity as a major centre of Shia scholarship, pilgrimage and religious culture gives it special significance for Indian Shia communities. India's Shia traditions, however, have developed in a

distinctive environment of linguistic diversity, regional patronage, plural society and Indo-Persian cultural influence. The result is a rich network of *Shia cultural affinity* rather than a simple one-way religious dependence.

The Shia cultural connection is visible most strongly in the rituals of Muharram. In many Indian cities and towns, Muharram is observed through majlis, marsiya, soz, noha, alam, tazia, processions and remembrance of Karbala. These practices connect Indian communities with the universal Shia memory of Imam Husain's martyrdom, yet they also carry Indian cultural forms. The Indian tazia tradition, Urdu marsiya poetry and local processional practices show how a transregional religious memory became rooted in Indian social soil.

Lucknow occupies a central place in Indian Shia culture. The Nawabs of Awadh patronized imambaras, scholarship, poetry, ritual performance, architecture and theological institutions. The Bara Imambara and Chhota Imambara are not merely monuments; they are symbols of Shia cultural refinement in India. The Lucknow school of marsiya, associated with poets such as Mir Anis and Mirza Dabeer, created a literary universe where the tragedy of Karbala was expressed through extraordinary poetic grandeur. This literature carries strong Persianate influence but became deeply Indian in language and emotion.

Hyderabad also represents an important centre of Shia and Indo-Persian culture. The Deccan developed rich connections with Iran through migration, courtly patronage, language, architecture and religious scholarship. Iranian nobles, administrators, soldiers, artists and scholars participated in Deccani political and cultural life. The result was a distinctive Indo-Persian-Shia cultural atmosphere that shaped architecture, literature, etiquette and religious practices.

Kashmir and Kargil also maintain Shia cultural links with Iran and the wider Persianate world. Persian language and literature had a profound influence on Kashmiri culture, and Shia communities in the region have maintained devotional and scholarly connections with Iran and Iraq. These connections are religious, educational and cultural. They also show how Indo-Iranian ties extend from the plains of North India to the Himalayan borderlands.

Shia seminaries and religious learning have historically created intellectual pathways between India, Iran and Iraq. Indian Shia scholars have studied in

centres such as Qom, Najaf and Mashhad, while Persian and Arabic religious texts circulated in Indian madrasas and libraries. This movement of ideas created a learned class familiar with Persian, Arabic, Islamic jurisprudence, theology and philosophy. Such networks are part of *scholarly people-to-people diplomacy*.

The cultural vocabulary of Indian Shia practice is also deeply Persianized. Words such as *majlis*, *alam*, *azadari*, *marsiya*, *soz*, *noha*, *matam*, *imambara*, *ziyarat* and *tabarruk* reflect a Persian-Arabic devotional lexicon that has become naturalized in Indian languages. These words are not merely technical religious terms; they carry emotions, rituals and memories. Language here becomes a shrine of identity.

At the same time, India must preserve these Shia connections within a broader plural and non-sectarian policy. India's relationship with Iran should not be reduced to Shia identity, just as India's relationship with Gulf Arab states should not be reduced to Sunni politics. India's civilization includes multiple religious traditions, and its foreign policy must remain inclusive. Shia cultural connections are valuable, but they should enrich diplomacy rather than sectarianize it.

In conclusion, Shia cultural connections between India and Iran are historically deep and socially vibrant. They connect Lucknow, Hyderabad, Kashmir, Kargil, Qom, Mashhad and Najaf through rituals, scholarship, poetry and pilgrimage. In refined language, Shia cultural connections are the *devotional corridor through which Karbala's memory, Persianate refinement and Indian plural society meet in living tradition*.

18.2.2 Pilgrimage and Religious Travel

Pilgrimage and religious travel create one of the most direct forms of people-to-people contact between India and Iran. While diplomacy speaks through official statements, pilgrimage speaks through movement, devotion, hospitality and shared sacred space. Indian pilgrims who travel to Iran for *ziyarat* experience Iran not only as a state but as a religious landscape containing shrines, seminaries, libraries, mosques, bazaars and sacred memories. This gives India-Iran relations a deeply human dimension.

Iran's major Shia pilgrimage destinations, especially Mashhad and Qom, are important for Indian Shia travellers. Mashhad is associated with the shrine of Imam Reza, while Qom is associated with the shrine of Hazrat Fatima

Masumeh and with major centres of Shia learning. For Indian pilgrims, these places are not simply tourist sites; they are sacred geographies. The journey to such places involves prayer, mourning, study, community bonding and spiritual renewal. It is a form of *religious mobility*.

Pilgrimage also connects India with Iraq through Iranian routes and wider Shia sacred circuits. Many Indian pilgrims travel to Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, while also visiting Iranian cities such as Mashhad, Qom and Tehran. This creates a transnational pilgrimage network across the Shia world. Iran's geographical position makes it an important part of this devotional map. Religious travel therefore strengthens social awareness across borders.

Pilgrimage has social consequences in India. When pilgrims return from Iran, they bring memories, religious literature, prayer objects, photographs, books, stories and community prestige. Their experiences are shared in families, mosques, imambaras and local gatherings. In this way, travel becomes social transmission. It deepens community knowledge of Iran and sustains emotional ties. This is *grassroots cultural diplomacy*.

Religious travel also creates economic activity. Pilgrimage involves travel agencies, airlines, hotels, translators, guides, religious scholars, food services, local transport, currency exchange and religious goods. If managed well, it can support tourism economies and deepen people-to-people contact. However, pilgrimage also requires safety, proper documentation, visa clarity, consular support and responsible travel agencies. Religious emotion must be matched with administrative care.

India and Iran should work together to make pilgrimage safe, transparent and dignified. This requires reliable visa procedures, verified tour operators, emergency contact systems, health facilities, travel insurance, consular registration, language assistance and awareness about local laws. Pilgrimage should not be left entirely to informal networks because pilgrims may include elderly persons, women, students and families who require support. A humane pilgrimage system is a form of *consular-cultural cooperation*.

Religious travel is vulnerable to regional instability. Iran–Israel tensions, flight disruptions, sanctions, health crises, pandemics, currency problems and travel advisories can affect pilgrims. During crises, pilgrims may become stranded or anxious, and embassies must intervene. This shows that pilgrimage is not separate from geopolitics. Sacred journeys depend on

political stability and aviation connectivity. India's interest in West Asian stability therefore has a human religious dimension.

Pilgrimage should also be understood within India's secular and plural diplomatic framework. The Indian state should facilitate safe travel for citizens without turning religious linkages into political alignment. It must protect Indian pilgrims in Iran just as it protects Indian pilgrims, workers, students and tourists elsewhere. The principle should be *citizen welfare and cultural respect*, not sectarian diplomacy.

In conclusion, pilgrimage and religious travel are intimate bridges between India and Iran. They connect sacred places, families, communities and memories. In elevated language, pilgrimage is the *spiritual pathway through which ordinary people transform geography into devotion and diplomacy into human experience*.

18.2.3 Social Bonds and Community Linkages

Social bonds and community linkages between India and Iran extend beyond formal religion. They include Parsis, Shia communities, scholars, traders, students, artists, language teachers, medical travellers, tourists, business families, cultural associations, Indian citizens in Iran, Iranian students in India and academic communities. These bonds create a social foundation for bilateral relations. They make India–Iran relations resilient because they are not dependent only on governments.

The Parsi community in India represents one of the oldest and most important civilizational links with ancient Iran. The Parsis trace their religious and historical origins to Zoroastrian Iran and settled in India centuries ago. Their contribution to India's industry, education, philanthropy, science, armed forces, law, theatre and public life has been extraordinary. The Parsi presence in India is a living symbol of India's capacity to receive, protect and enrich a community of Iranian origin. It represents *hospitality transformed into national contribution*.

Shia communities form another social bridge. Their rituals, literature, seminaries, pilgrimages and devotional networks connect India with Iran and Iraq. Indian Shia culture, however, is strongly Indian in expression, especially through Urdu poetry, local architecture, regional festivals, processions and community institutions. This makes it a bridge of both religious affinity and cultural creativity.

Students and scholars are also important. Iranian students studying in India and Indian students studying in Iran create personal knowledge of each other's societies. They learn languages, build friendships, understand daily life, and often become informal ambassadors. Education creates long-term social memory. A student who spends years in another country often carries that relationship for life. This is *educational people-to-people capital*.

Traders and business communities have historically connected India and Iran through ports, bazaars and caravan routes. Even today, exporters of rice, tea, pharmaceuticals, dry fruits, carpets, handicrafts, books and cultural items maintain commercial relationships that also carry social meanings. Trade in culturally familiar goods—tea, rice, dry fruits, carpets, saffron, spices and medicines—creates everyday contact between societies.

Artists, musicians and film-makers also serve as community bridges. Music concerts, film festivals, poetry readings, calligraphy exhibitions, theatre workshops and cultural seminars introduce societies to each other beyond political stereotypes. Such exchanges are especially important in times of sanctions and media polarization. Culture humanizes the other.

Social bonds are also formed through medicine and health. Iranian patients may travel to India for treatment, and Indian medicines reach Iranian households. Medical cooperation creates trust at the family level. Healthcare is one of the strongest forms of human connection because it touches vulnerability, hope and gratitude.

Community linkages must be protected from political shocks. When sanctions intensify or regional tensions rise, visas, flights, payments and travel become difficult. Social relations suffer. Therefore, cultural and consular mechanisms are necessary to keep people-to-people ties alive even during strategic stress. Governments should protect academic travel, cultural exchanges, student welfare and medical movement as far as possible.

In conclusion, India–Iran social bonds are broad and historically rooted. Parsis, Shias, scholars, students, traders, artists, patients, tourists and cultural institutions all form part of this social architecture. In refined language, these community linkages are the *human infrastructure of India–Iran relations, stronger than temporary diplomatic weather and deeper than political calculation*.

18.3 Education and Academic Cooperation

Education and academic cooperation are essential for carrying India–Iran relations into the future. Culture preserves memory, but education creates continuity. Universities, research institutes, language departments, libraries, archives, seminars, think tanks and scholarship programmes can transform historical affinity into contemporary knowledge. India and Iran possess rich intellectual traditions, and their academic cooperation can strengthen both cultural diplomacy and strategic understanding.

The 1956 Cultural Agreement already recognized the importance of student exchange, university teachers, scientific institutions, scholarships, translations and cultural institutes. This shows that education has long been part of India–Iran diplomacy. The agreement’s vision remains relevant because modern relations require not only political dialogue but also academic literacy. Nations that understand each other’s history, language, society and strategic culture can avoid misperception.

Academic cooperation should include Persian studies in India, Indian studies in Iran, Sanskrit and Hindi studies, Islamic studies, Zoroastrian studies, Sufi studies, history, archaeology, art history, international relations, energy studies, maritime studies, Central Asian studies, trade, public health, biotechnology, agriculture, climate studies, digital humanities and comparative literature. The field is vast. India and Iran should not restrict academic cooperation only to classical culture; they should also include contemporary policy and science.

Education also supports diplomacy. Scholars can explain historical context, challenge stereotypes, translate texts, advise policymakers, train diplomats and build intellectual bridges. When academic communities decline, diplomacy becomes shallow. India–Iran academic cooperation should therefore be treated as a form of *knowledge diplomacy*.

18.3.1 Student Exchanges

Student exchanges are among the most valuable instruments of India–Iran people-to-people relations. Students are not merely temporary visitors; they are future professionals, teachers, administrators, scholars, doctors, engineers, translators, entrepreneurs and cultural interpreters. A student who studies in India or Iran carries lived experience, language familiarity and

social understanding back home. This creates a long-term reservoir of goodwill.

Iranian students have shown interest in Indian higher education because India offers a wide range of programmes in arts, science, engineering, management, social sciences, humanities, technology and professional education. Indian universities provide relatively affordable education, English-medium opportunities, diverse campus environments and exposure to a large democratic society. Scholarships through cultural and educational mechanisms can strengthen this flow.

Indian students in Iran may pursue religious studies, Persian language, Islamic studies, medicine, humanities, culture, international relations and other areas. Iran's universities and seminaries have strengths in Persian literature, Islamic philosophy, Shia theology, history, art, medicine and regional studies. For Indian students interested in Persian civilization, Iran is not only a country of study; it is a living archive.

Student exchanges require strong administrative support. Students need reliable information about recognized universities, admission procedures, scholarships, visas, safety, health insurance, hostel facilities, degree recognition and emergency registration. Consular guidance is especially important in a region affected by political tensions. Education diplomacy must include student welfare. A neglected student community can become a diplomatic problem; a supported student community becomes a diplomatic asset.

Language preparation is also important. Iranian students coming to India may need English support; Indian students going to Iran may need Persian-language training. Language learning improves academic success and social integration. India and Iran should develop pre-departure orientation programmes, language courses, cultural briefings and student mentoring networks.

Student exchanges should be diversified. They should not be limited to religious or cultural studies. Science, technology, medicine, agriculture, engineering, renewable energy, digital systems, pharmaceuticals, public health and climate studies should also be included. This would make education cooperation relevant to development needs. The future requires *academic modernization*, not only heritage preservation.

Exchange programmes can also include short-term courses, summer schools, joint fieldwork, internships, online lectures and youth delegations. Digital platforms allow cooperation even when travel is difficult. Hybrid academic exchange can protect continuity during sanctions, pandemics or regional crises.

In conclusion, student exchanges are a powerful tool of India–Iran cooperation. They create human bridges, intellectual familiarity and long-term goodwill. In elevated language, student exchange is the *educational bloodstream through which civilizational friendship passes into the next generation*.

18.3.2 University Cooperation

University cooperation can give institutional depth to India–Iran academic relations. Student exchanges are valuable, but they become more meaningful when supported by formal partnerships between universities, research centres, libraries, archives and academic councils. Such cooperation can include memoranda of understanding, faculty exchanges, joint research projects, conferences, dual workshops, manuscript cataloguing, language programmes, visiting professorships and digital archives.

Indian universities with strong Persian, Urdu, history, Islamic studies, Central Asian studies, international relations and cultural studies departments can cooperate with Iranian universities in Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, Mashhad, Qom, Tabriz and other academic centres. Similarly, Iranian universities can cooperate with Indian institutions in Delhi, Aligarh, Hyderabad, Lucknow, Kashmir, Kolkata, Pune, Mumbai, Chennai and other cities. The academic geography of both countries is rich enough to support multiple partnerships.

University cooperation should also include science and technology. Iran has a strong scientific community, and India has globally visible capabilities in IT, pharmaceuticals, space applications, biotechnology, agriculture, engineering and management. Joint seminars on renewable energy, water management, drought-resistant agriculture, public health, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, digital humanities and climate adaptation could be valuable. Culture and science should not be separated. A mature academic relationship includes both *heritage studies and future technologies*.

Faculty exchange is especially important. Teachers create intellectual networks and influence generations of students. Visiting chairs in Persian

studies in India and Indian studies in Iran can strengthen academic continuity. Guest lectures, translation workshops and joint supervision of doctoral research can create deeper collaboration. Academic exchange should not be occasional ceremonial exchange; it should produce publications, translations, datasets, conferences and trained scholars.

Libraries and archives offer major opportunities. India possesses vast Persian manuscripts in universities, museums, private collections, dargahs, libraries and archives. Iran possesses manuscript expertise, calligraphic traditions and Persian philological scholarship. Joint cataloguing, digitization, conservation and translation of Persian manuscripts in India could become a flagship project. This would serve scholarship and cultural diplomacy simultaneously.

University cooperation can also include archaeology and art history. Indo-Iranian contacts from ancient trade to Mughal-Safavid exchange, Sufi networks, miniature painting, architecture and inscriptions deserve joint study. Archaeologists, historians and art historians from both countries can collaborate on exhibitions, publications and heritage conservation. This would enrich public understanding.

Think-tank cooperation should also be included within academic cooperation. Institutes studying foreign policy, energy, maritime security, Central Asia, West Asia, sanctions, Chabahar and INSTC can help policymakers. Academic diplomacy should connect classical civilization with contemporary strategy. India–Iran relations need both poets and policy analysts.

However, university cooperation faces challenges: sanctions, funding shortages, visa delays, travel advisories, language barriers, degree recognition, digital restrictions and political sensitivities. These problems can be addressed through phased cooperation, online programmes, government support, academic autonomy and clear institutional frameworks. The goal should be continuity even in difficult periods.

In conclusion, university cooperation can institutionalize India–Iran academic relations and convert cultural goodwill into sustained knowledge production. In refined language, universities are the *intellectual bridges through which India and Iran can transform inherited civilization into organized scholarship and future-oriented innovation.*

18.3.3 Research on Persian and Indian Studies

Research on Persian and Indian studies is one of the most important academic fields connecting the two countries. Persian studies in India and Indian studies in Iran are not narrow literary subjects; they are gateways to history, diplomacy, religion, art, political culture, manuscript traditions, social memory, language contact and civilizational exchange. Without such research, India and Iran risk losing understanding of the very heritage that makes their relationship special.

Persian studies in India have a distinguished history. Many Indian universities have departments or scholars working on Persian language, literature, manuscripts, Indo-Persian historiography, Sufism, medieval history, Mughal studies, Deccan studies, Urdu-Persian relations and translation. India's archives contain extraordinary Persian material, including farmans, chronicles, letters, poetry collections, revenue records, travel accounts, biographies, dictionaries and philosophical writings. These sources are essential for writing Indian history.

Indian studies in Iran can also be strengthened. Iranian scholars have long been interested in Indian philosophy, Sanskrit literature, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Persianate India, Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, Bollywood, Indian foreign policy and South Asian society. Iran's understanding of India should go beyond ancient romanticism and include modern India's democracy, economy, technology, social change, education, cinema and geopolitics. Indian studies in Iran can become a major field of *contemporary civilizational literacy*.

Translation is central to this research. Persian works produced in India should be translated into modern Indian languages and English. Indian philosophical, literary and historical works should be translated into Persian. Translation allows ideas to travel. It also prevents cultural memory from remaining trapped in specialist circles. A translation movement between Persian and Indian languages would be one of the most valuable cultural projects of the twenty-first century.

Manuscript preservation is urgent. Many Persian manuscripts in India remain uncatalogued, poorly preserved or inaccessible. Joint India–Iran programmes in digitization, conservation, palaeography, cataloguing and publication can rescue this heritage. Digital humanities tools can create searchable databases,

online exhibitions and collaborative research platforms. This would make Indo-Persian heritage accessible to young scholars globally.

Research should also include religious and social linkages. Studies on Shia culture in India, Muharram traditions, Sufi networks, Persian inscriptions, Indo-Iranian trade routes, Parsi history, Zoroastrian heritage, Iranian migrants in India and Indian travellers to Iran can deepen understanding. Such research should be academically rigorous and avoid politicized simplification.

Contemporary research is equally important. India and Iran should support studies on Chabahar, INSTC, sanctions, energy, trade, maritime security, Afghanistan, Central Asia, digital economy, public health, climate change and migration. Cultural studies and strategic studies should speak to each other. A country cannot understand another only through poetry or only through power politics; it needs both.

Research cooperation should involve doctoral fellowships, joint publications, edited volumes, archival training, conferences, visiting scholarships and research grants. Young scholars should be encouraged. Without new generations of Persianists, Iranologists, Indologists and strategic scholars, the intellectual bridge may weaken. Academic heritage requires renewal.

In conclusion, research on Persian and Indian studies is central to India–Iran cultural diplomacy. It preserves memory, produces knowledge, trains specialists and corrects stereotypes. In elevated language, such research is the *scholarly mirror in which India and Iran rediscover their shared past and interpret their contemporary partnership*.

18.4 Soft Power in India–Iran Relations

Soft power in India–Iran relations operates through culture, cinema, language, spirituality, education, tourism, literature, cuisine, music, yoga, scholarship, media, art and civilizational memory. Unlike hard power, which uses military and economic instruments, soft power works through attraction, admiration, familiarity and emotional resonance. In the Indo-Iranian context, soft power is especially rich because both civilizations possess deep cultural prestige.

India's soft power in Iran includes cinema, yoga, Ayurveda, Indian classical dance, Bollywood music, Indian food, educational institutions, democratic culture, pluralism, religious diversity, information technology and historical

memory. Iran's soft power in India includes Persian literature, poetry, calligraphy, carpets, architecture, Sufi thought, Shia sacred geography, classical music connections, cinema and the memory of Persianate India. The relationship is therefore not one-sided. It is a *reciprocal soft-power field*.

Soft power becomes especially important when hard politics becomes difficult. Sanctions, oil disruption, nuclear controversy, regional conflict and great-power pressure can create diplomatic strain. Cultural attraction can preserve goodwill during such periods. When people continue to enjoy each other's poetry, films, food, shrines and scholarship, the relationship retains warmth. Soft power is therefore a form of *diplomatic resilience*.

India and Iran should consciously strengthen soft-power instruments. Cultural centres, language courses, film festivals, translation projects, tourism promotion, student exchanges, youth delegations, digital archives, university chairs, art exhibitions and media cooperation can all deepen public familiarity. Soft power requires institutions, not only memory.

18.4.1 Cinema and Media

Cinema and media are powerful instruments of India–Iran soft power. Indian cinema has long enjoyed recognition in many parts of the world, including West Asia and Iran. Films carry images of society, emotion, family, music, morality, romance, struggle, spirituality and modern life. Through cinema, ordinary people encounter another country without crossing borders. This makes cinema a form of *popular cultural diplomacy*.

Bollywood has a special appeal because it combines music, emotion, family drama, moral conflict and visual spectacle. Iranian audiences, like many Asian audiences, can relate to themes of family honour, sacrifice, love, social inequality and generational change. Indian cinema's emotional grammar often travels more easily than official diplomacy. Songs, actors, dance sequences and film narratives create familiarity with Indian society.

Iranian cinema is also internationally respected. Iranian directors have produced films known for poetic realism, moral complexity, social sensitivity and artistic restraint. Iranian cinema has received global recognition because of its subtle storytelling and human depth. Indian film-makers, critics and audiences can learn from Iranian cinema's aesthetic discipline. Film cooperation can therefore be reciprocal: India offers scale and popular reach; Iran offers artistic minimalism and philosophical depth.

Film festivals are important platforms. Screenings of Indian films in Iran and Iranian films in India can create cultural curiosity. Joint film weeks, subtitling projects, director interactions, student workshops and co-production discussions can strengthen the relationship. Documentary cinema can also explore shared heritage such as Persian manuscripts in India, Sufi shrines, Indo-Persian architecture, Chabahar, Parsi heritage, Iranian travellers in India and Indian pilgrims in Iran.

Media cooperation is equally important but more sensitive. News media often frame Iran through sanctions, nuclear controversy, conflict and Western narratives. Iranian media may frame India through geopolitical developments, Kashmir comments, U.S. relations or trade issues. Both countries need more nuanced media understanding. Journalist exchanges, academic media studies, translation of credible analysis and responsible reporting can reduce stereotypes.

Digital media creates new opportunities. Social media platforms, podcasts, online lectures, digital exhibitions, subtitles, language-learning videos and virtual cultural festivals can reach young audiences. India and Iran should use digital diplomacy to connect students, artists, scholars and tourists. Soft power in the twenty-first century must be audiovisual, multilingual and interactive.

However, cinema and media cooperation must be managed with sensitivity. India is a plural democracy with diverse social content; Iran has its own cultural regulations and moral codes. Cooperation should respect each country's laws while encouraging creative exchange. The aim is not ideological conversion but cultural appreciation. Mature cultural diplomacy respects difference.

In conclusion, cinema and media can humanize India–Iran relations. They show societies to each other through emotion, image and narrative. In elevated language, cinema and media are the *moving mirrors through which India and Iran can see each other not as diplomatic abstractions but as living human civilizations*.

18.4.2 Tourism

Tourism is one of the most practical forms of people-to-people contact between India and Iran. It converts cultural curiosity into travel, hospitality, employment, memory and mutual understanding. India and Iran both possess

extraordinary tourism assets. India offers religious diversity, historical monuments, Buddhist sites, Hindu pilgrimage centres, Islamic architecture, Sufi shrines, yoga, Ayurveda, mountains, beaches, wildlife, cuisine and festivals. Iran offers ancient Persian heritage, Islamic architecture, Shia shrines, bazaars, poetry cities, deserts, mountains, gardens, museums and archaeological sites. Together, they form a powerful tourism partnership.

Religious tourism is especially important. Indian Shia pilgrims visit Iranian sacred cities such as Mashhad and Qom. Iranian visitors may travel to India for Sufi shrines, Islamic heritage, medical treatment, education, yoga, business and cultural tourism. India's cities such as Delhi, Agra, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Ajmer, Kashmir and Mumbai contain monuments and cultural sites connected with Indo-Persian history. These places can be promoted as part of an *Indo-Persian heritage circuit*.

Cultural tourism can be built around shared heritage. A tourist route in India could include Humayun's Tomb, Red Fort, Fatehpur Sikri, Taj Mahal, Awadh imambaras, Deccani monuments, Sufi shrines, Persian manuscript libraries and Parsi heritage sites. In Iran, Indian tourists could visit Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, Yazd, Persepolis, Mashhad, Qom and historical caravan routes. Such tourism would connect architecture, literature, religion and history.

Medical tourism is another promising field. India is a major destination for affordable healthcare, specialized surgery, diagnostics, Ayurveda and wellness services. Iranian patients may find Indian medical care attractive due to cost, quality and familiarity. Medical tourism creates strong goodwill because it touches human suffering and healing. It can be linked with pharmaceuticals and hospital cooperation.

Educational tourism and academic travel can also expand. Students, researchers, professors and language learners can visit archives, universities, libraries, cultural centres and archaeological sites. Short-term study tours on Persian India, Indian philosophy, Sufi heritage, Mughal architecture, Zoroastrian heritage and modern geopolitics can deepen academic cooperation. Tourism can therefore become an extension of education.

Tourism requires enabling conditions. Visa procedures, flights, safety advisories, currency facilities, hotel standards, language guides, digital information, halal and vegetarian food options, women's safety, consular support and reliable travel agencies are essential. Without these, cultural

desire may not become actual travel. Tourism diplomacy must therefore focus on practical facilitation.

Regional instability has a direct impact on tourism. Iran–Israel tensions, sanctions, flight disruptions, safety concerns and visa changes can reduce travel. Therefore, tourism is one more reason India has an interest in West Asian stability. People-to-people relations need peace. Tourism declines where anxiety rises.

India and Iran should consider joint tourism promotion. Heritage maps, documentary films, digital exhibitions, bilingual guidebooks, pilgrimage advisories, cultural festivals and tourism fairs can support travel. The two sides can also promote responsible tourism, heritage conservation and community-based tourism. Tourism should not merely consume heritage; it should preserve and interpret it.

In conclusion, tourism is a powerful soft-power instrument in India–Iran relations. It brings people into direct contact with landscapes, monuments, shrines and societies. In refined language, tourism is the *experiential diplomacy through which civilizational memory becomes personal journey*.

18.4.3 Cultural Centres and Language Promotion

Cultural centres and language promotion are essential institutional instruments of India–Iran soft power. Historical affinity cannot sustain itself automatically; it needs teaching, translation, events, libraries, exhibitions, performances, seminars and youth outreach. Cultural centres provide the physical and intellectual space where such activities can occur. They transform memory into programmes and goodwill into continuity.

The Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Tehran plays an important role in promoting Indian culture in Iran. Through yoga, Indian classical dance, music, Hindi, cultural events, exhibitions, film screenings, lectures and celebrations of Indian festivals, such a centre introduces Iranian audiences to India's cultural diversity. It is an instrument of *Indian civilizational projection through cultural education*.

Iranian cultural institutions in India also play a valuable role. Iran's cultural centres and Persian-language promotion activities support Persian studies, calligraphy, poetry, film, art, translation and civilizational dialogue. Persian language has a special place in India because it shaped Indian history,

literature and administration for centuries. Promoting Persian in India is therefore not only foreign-language teaching; it is recovery of Indian heritage.

Language promotion must be two-sided. Persian should be strengthened in Indian universities, and Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit and Indian studies should be promoted in Iran. Persian helps Indians understand Mughal records, Sufi texts, poetry, Indo-Persian chronicles and Islamic intellectual traditions. Hindi and Indian studies help Iranians understand modern India, Indian society, cinema, literature, politics and culture. Language is the key to deeper understanding.

Translation projects are especially important. India and Iran should support translation of Persian classics into Indian languages and English, and translation of Indian classics into Persian. Works of Hafez, Saadi, Rumi, Ferdowsi, Attar, Jami and Indo-Persian poets should be made accessible to Indian readers. Similarly, Indian works from Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil and other languages can reach Persian readers. Translation is *diplomacy of the written word*.

Cultural centres can also support manuscript preservation. India's Persian manuscripts need cataloguing, digitization and conservation. Joint workshops on calligraphy, palaeography, manuscript reading and conservation can train young scholars. Digital archives can connect libraries in India and Iran. This would make cultural diplomacy intellectually serious rather than merely ceremonial.

Language promotion should involve schools, universities, online platforms and public culture. Short Persian courses for Indian diplomats, journalists, historians and students can improve Iran literacy. Hindi and Indian culture courses for Iranian students can improve India literacy. Online courses can reach audiences beyond capitals. Digital language learning is essential for the younger generation.

Cultural centres should also engage contemporary youth. Poetry alone may not attract all young people unless linked with music, film, design, digital media, animation, cuisine, travel, photography and social media. A modern cultural centre must combine classical heritage with contemporary creativity. It must be both archive and laboratory.

In conclusion, cultural centres and language promotion are indispensable for sustaining India–Iran soft power. They provide continuity, instruction,

visibility and institutional memory. In elevated language, cultural centres are the *civilizational embassies where language, art, scholarship and friendship are cultivated beyond the formal corridors of power.*

Concluding Observation

Religious and social linkages, education and academic cooperation, and soft power together form the living heart of India–Iran people-to-people relations. Shia cultural connections, pilgrimage, community bonds, student exchanges, university partnerships, Persian and Indian studies, cinema, media, tourism, cultural centres and language promotion all deepen the relationship beyond strategic necessity. They create affection, familiarity and resilience.

India–Iran relations cannot be sustained only through ports, sanctions, trade and diplomacy. They also require people who read each other's poetry, visit each other's shrines, study each other's history, watch each other's films, speak each other's languages and understand each other's pain and pride. In the broader architecture of bilateral relations, culture and people-to-people ties are the *inner lamp of civilizational diplomacy*, illuminating the path even when geopolitics becomes dark and uncertain.

Chapter 19:

Major Challenges in India–Iran Relations

India–Iran relations are historically deep, civilizationally rich and strategically significant, yet they remain burdened by multiple challenges. These challenges do not arise from bilateral hostility alone; rather, they emerge from the wider geopolitical environment in which India and Iran must operate. The relationship is shaped by U.S. sanctions, Iran–Israel conflict, Gulf rivalries, Afghanistan instability, Pakistan’s obstructionist geography, China’s expanding regional role, payment problems, trade contraction and banking restrictions. Thus, India–Iran relations are not weak because of absence of goodwill; they are constrained because the relationship exists within a dense web of *external pressure, regional volatility and financial fragility*.

The central paradox of India–Iran relations is that their strategic logic is strong, but their operational execution is weak. India needs Iran for Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, INSTC, Eurasian access, energy diversification and civilizational diplomacy. Iran needs India as a large market, a non-Western partner, a civilizational friend, a food and pharmaceutical supplier, and a balancing presence against excessive dependence on China. Yet this natural convergence is repeatedly interrupted by sanctions, banking restrictions, geopolitical mistrust and regional conflict. This is a relationship of *high potential but persistent obstruction*.

The challenges in India–Iran relations must be studied in three categories: external challenges, regional challenges and economic challenges. External challenges arise mainly from powers and conflicts outside the bilateral relationship, especially the United States, Israel, Gulf Arab rivalries and global sanctions regimes. Regional challenges arise from Afghanistan, Pakistan and China’s growing role in Iran and the surrounding connectivity architecture. Economic challenges arise from payment mechanisms, reduced oil trade, banking restrictions and weak private-sector confidence. Together, these challenges create a *strategic bottleneck*.

In classical geopolitical thought, Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* reminds us that control and security of sea lanes matter deeply for India–Iran relations because the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea are vital to energy and trade. Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History* explains why Iran's location matters for Eurasian access. Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace* explains the significance of the rimland, where Iran and India's western maritime outreach intersect. These theories help us understand why the challenges are not incidental; they arise because India–Iran relations are located at the intersection of *maritime chokepoints, continental corridors and great-power rivalry*.

19.1 External Challenges

External challenges are the most powerful constraints on India–Iran relations. These challenges come mainly from the international system and the regional security order of West Asia. India and Iran may desire stronger cooperation, but their choices are restricted by U.S. sanctions, Iran–Israel conflict, Gulf Arab anxieties, international banking restrictions, maritime tensions, and the strategic expectations of other powers. The relationship is therefore affected by what may be called *third-party pressure*.

The greatest difficulty is that India's relationship with Iran is not isolated from India's relations with the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Europe, Russia and China. India has become a major strategic partner of the United States, a defence and technology partner of Israel, and an energy-investment partner of Gulf Arab states. At the same time, Iran is under severe pressure from many of these actors. This creates a diplomatic dilemma for India. If India moves too close to Iran, it risks pressure from the United States and concern from Israel and Gulf partners. If India moves too far from Iran, it weakens Chabahar, Afghanistan access and Eurasian connectivity. This is the *triangular pressure of contemporary Indian diplomacy*.

External challenges are especially serious because they affect practical cooperation. Sanctions affect banking and trade. Iran–Israel conflict affects regional stability and shipping. Gulf rivalries affect India's diaspora and energy interests. U.S. policy affects Chabahar. Western financial restrictions affect Indian exporters and importers. Therefore, external challenges do not

remain abstract diplomatic issues; they enter the world of ports, banks, ships, oil, visas, insurance and business contracts.

In conclusion, external challenges constitute the outer ring of pressure around India–Iran relations. They limit the speed, scale and visibility of cooperation. In refined strategic language, external challenges are the *geopolitical weather system under which India–Iran relations must constantly adjust their diplomatic sails*.

19.1.1 U.S. Sanctions

U.S. sanctions are the most serious external challenge in India–Iran relations. They affect oil trade, banking, shipping, insurance, investment, petrochemicals, ports, financial institutions and business confidence. The sanctions system is not merely a set of legal prohibitions; it is a vast structure of *financial deterrence* that influences banks, companies, insurers and governments across the world. Because the U.S. dollar and American financial networks remain central to global commerce, U.S. sanctions have effects far beyond American territory.

For India, sanctions have produced a direct economic cost. Iranian crude oil was once an important component of India's energy basket. It offered geographical proximity, refinery familiarity and supplier diversification. After the tightening of sanctions, Indian imports of Iranian oil declined sharply and eventually halted in formal terms. This reduced trade volume, weakened energy cooperation and forced India to diversify toward other suppliers. The result was a dramatic transformation of India–Iran trade from an oil-centred relationship into a modest non-oil trade relationship based mainly on food, pharmaceuticals, dry fruits and selected commodities.

Sanctions also affect Chabahar. India has consistently argued that Chabahar is not a sanctions-evasion project but a connectivity, humanitarian and regional-development project. It helps Afghanistan access the sea, gives Central Asia a southern outlet and provides India a route bypassing Pakistan. Yet the sanctions environment creates uncertainty for banks, contractors, port operators, shipping companies and private investors. Even when a project receives temporary protection or diplomatic understanding, businesses remain cautious. Chabahar thus becomes a *strategic project under legal shadow*.

The banking effect of sanctions is especially damaging. Banks avoid Iran-related transactions because they fear penalties, loss of dollar access, compliance complications and reputational risk. This affects even legitimate trade in rice, tea, medicines and agricultural commodities. The result is *over-compliance*, where businesses avoid legal transactions because the risk environment appears too dangerous. Such over-compliance reduces trade and weakens bilateral trust.

Sanctions also create political pressure. The United States expects partners to restrict engagement with Iran, while Iran expects India to resist excessive pressure and preserve civilizational friendship. India must negotiate between these positions. It cannot ignore the United States because India–U.S. relations are central to defence, technology, Indo-Pacific strategy and global diplomacy. It cannot ignore Iran because Iran is essential for Chabahar, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Thus, sanctions force India into *strategic balancing under financial coercion*.

Sanctions also indirectly push Iran closer to China. When India, Europe and many private companies reduce economic engagement because of sanctions, China gains more space as a risk-tolerant buyer, investor and strategic partner. This is not favourable to India because excessive Chinese influence in Iran may reduce India's strategic room. Thus, sanctions intended to isolate Iran may indirectly strengthen China's position in Iran. This creates a paradox for Indian policy.

India's response must be careful. It should not recklessly violate sanctions in ways that damage its broader global interests, but it must also preserve legitimate national interests through negotiation, legal clarity and protected channels. India should seek space for Chabahar, humanitarian trade, food exports, medicines, educational cooperation and limited non-sanctioned commerce. The aim should be *lawful strategic persistence*.

In conclusion, U.S. sanctions are the principal structural obstacle in India–Iran relations. They reduce energy trade, complicate banking, slow Chabahar, discourage investment and increase Iran's dependence on China. In elevated language, U.S. sanctions are the *extraterritorial financial wall through which American power narrows India's economic and strategic room with Iran*.

19.1.2 Iran–Israel Conflict

The Iran–Israel conflict is another major external challenge for India–Iran relations. Iran and Israel are not merely political rivals; they are engaged in a deep ideological, military, intelligence and regional-security confrontation. Their rivalry involves nuclear concerns, missile threats, cyber operations, covert actions, assassinations, airstrikes, proxy conflicts, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, Iraq, Yemen and the Red Sea. When this conflict escalates, India’s West Asia policy becomes more difficult because India has close relations with Israel and important relations with Iran.

India’s partnership with Israel is strong in defence, technology, agriculture, water, cyber security, innovation and counter-terrorism. Israel is a valuable strategic partner for India. At the same time, Iran is vital for Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy security and civilizational diplomacy. If Iran–Israel conflict intensifies, India faces pressure to take positions, issue statements, protect citizens, adjust aviation routes, monitor oil prices and reassure partners. This creates a diplomatic challenge of *dual-partner sensitivity*.

The conflict also affects regional stability. Any direct Iran–Israel war can disrupt the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea and eastern Mediterranean. It can increase oil prices, disturb shipping routes, raise insurance costs, threaten Indian workers in the Gulf and damage investment sentiment. India’s economy is vulnerable to such shocks because it depends heavily on imported energy and maritime trade. Therefore, India has no interest in escalation. Its preferred policy is restraint, dialogue and de-escalation.

Iran–Israel conflict also affects Chabahar indirectly. If Iran comes under military attack, severe sanctions expansion or maritime disruption, Chabahar operations may suffer. Shipping lines may hesitate; insurers may raise costs; banks may withdraw; cargo movement may slow. A port project depends on political stability. Thus, the conflict damages not only security but connectivity.

India must also manage public diplomacy carefully. India’s domestic society is plural, and West Asian conflicts often generate emotional responses. India must avoid communal polarization in its domestic discourse while maintaining balanced foreign policy. Its language should emphasize civilian protection, regional restraint, terrorism concerns, peaceful settlement and

India's national interests. This is *diplomatic moderation in a charged moral environment*.

The Iran–Israel conflict also strengthens the role of the United States and Gulf states in shaping the regional environment. Israel's security relationship with the United States and Iran's hostility toward U.S. military presence create wider strategic complications. Gulf states may fear Iranian retaliation or Israeli escalation. India has relationships with all these actors. Therefore, every Iran–Israel escalation becomes a test of India's *multi-aligned statecraft*.

India should continue to separate its relationships. Defence cooperation with Israel should not be presented as anti-Iran. Connectivity cooperation with Iran should not be presented as anti-Israel. India's policy should remain issue-based: Israel for technology and security, Iran for connectivity and regional access, Gulf states for energy and diaspora, and the United States for defence and technology. This is the logic of *de-hyphenated diplomacy*.

In conclusion, the Iran–Israel conflict is a serious challenge because it threatens regional stability and complicates India's balancing. India must avoid being drawn into the hostility while protecting its interests with both sides. In refined language, the Iran–Israel conflict is the *strategic fireline across which India must walk with disciplined neutrality and careful national-interest calculation*.

19.1.3 Gulf Rivalries

Gulf rivalries are another important external challenge in India–Iran relations. The Persian Gulf is not a peaceful economic lake; it is a politically sensitive region shaped by Iran–Saudi competition, Arab–Persian historical rivalry, sectarian narratives, U.S. military presence, oil politics, shipping routes, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Qatar's diplomacy, UAE–Iran commercial ties, and the security anxieties of smaller Gulf states. India's relationship with Iran must therefore operate within a wider Gulf security environment.

India has deep interests in Gulf Arab states. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among India's major energy, trade, investment and diaspora partners. Qatar is important for LNG. Oman has maritime and strategic relevance. Kuwait and Bahrain host Indian communities and maintain economic ties. Millions of Indians work in the Gulf, and remittances from the region support Indian households. Therefore, India cannot allow its relationship with Iran to damage its Gulf Arab partnerships.

Iran's relations with Gulf states are complex. Iran has rivalry with Saudi Arabia, yet both have also pursued diplomatic normalization. Iran maintains significant trade and social links with the UAE, while also facing strategic suspicion from Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Oman often plays a mediating role. Qatar maintains a flexible diplomatic posture. Thus, Gulf politics is not fixed; it is fluid. For India, this creates both challenge and opportunity. It must read the Gulf not through old binaries but through *shifting pragmatic alignments*.

Gulf rivalries affect India through energy. Any tension between Iran and Gulf Arab states can threaten oil infrastructure, tanker routes, LNG supplies and energy prices. Attacks on vessels, threats in the Strait of Hormuz, drone strikes on energy facilities or maritime incidents can immediately affect India. India's energy security depends upon Gulf stability, not merely supplier contracts. Thus, Gulf rivalry becomes an Indian economic concern.

Gulf rivalries also affect the Indian diaspora. Indian workers live across the Gulf, including in countries that may have different relations with Iran. A regional conflict can create evacuation challenges, employment instability, travel disruptions and consular emergencies. India must therefore avoid appearing partisan in Gulf rivalries. Its diplomacy must reassure all sides that India seeks regional peace, not bloc politics.

Gulf rivalries also intersect with Israel. Some Gulf states have normalized or deepened ties with Israel, while Iran remains hostile to Israel. India participates in frameworks such as I2U2 with the UAE, Israel and the United States, but it also works with Iran through Chabahar. This creates a delicate diplomatic equation. India must ensure that its participation in Israel–Gulf economic frameworks is not interpreted by Iran as containment.

Gulf rivalries can also affect Chabahar and INSTC. If Gulf states view Iran as unstable or if Iran views Gulf–Israel cooperation as threatening, regional logistics and investment may suffer. India must present Chabahar as inclusive connectivity that benefits Afghanistan, Central Asia and the region, not as an anti-Gulf or anti-Pakistan military project. Economic legitimacy is essential.

India's best response is balanced engagement. It should deepen relations with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait while maintaining Iran ties. It should support dialogue between Iran and Gulf states and avoid sectarian language. India's policy must remain *non-sectarian, non-bloc and*

commercially pragmatic. This is necessary because India has interests on all sides.

In conclusion, Gulf rivalries challenge India–Iran relations by complicating energy security, diaspora welfare, maritime safety and regional diplomacy. India must neither ignore Iran nor alienate Gulf Arab states. In elevated diplomatic language, Gulf rivalries are the *regional crosscurrents through which India must steer its West Asian vessel without losing balance, cargo or compass.*

19.2 Regional Challenges

Regional challenges arise from India and Iran’s immediate and extended neighbourhoods. Afghanistan instability, the Pakistan factor and China’s growing role are the most important among them. These challenges are not external in the distant sense; they are embedded in the geography that connects India and Iran. They shape Chabahar, Central Asia access, terrorism, trade corridors, maritime competition and continental strategy.

India–Iran relations are often described as natural because Iran provides India a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan. However, this same geography also creates vulnerability. Afghanistan is unstable; Pakistan blocks direct Indian access; China is expanding through CPEC, Gwadar and Iran-related economic diplomacy. Thus, the very corridor that gives India–Iran relations strategic value also exposes them to regional risk. This is the paradox of *corridor geopolitics.*

Regional challenges are especially important because they cannot be solved only by bilateral goodwill. India and Iran may agree on Chabahar, but Afghanistan’s instability can limit transit. India may want Central Asian access, but Pakistan’s obstruction complicates overland trade. India may invest in connectivity, but China’s financial power may reshape regional infrastructure. Therefore, India–Iran cooperation requires not only bilateral planning but regional management.

In conclusion, regional challenges constitute the inner ring of pressure around India–Iran relations. They arise from geography, borders, rival corridors and unstable neighbours. In refined language, regional challenges are the *continental frictions that obstruct India and Iran’s shared ambition for westward and northward connectivity.*

19.2.1 Afghanistan Instability

Afghanistan instability is one of the most serious regional challenges in India–Iran relations. Afghanistan is the land bridge that gives Chabahar and India–Iran connectivity their strongest strategic meaning. If Afghanistan is stable, Chabahar can serve as a route for trade, humanitarian aid, development goods and access to Central Asia. If Afghanistan is unstable, the corridor remains underused and insecure. Therefore, Afghanistan is the *strategic hinge* between India and Iran.

India and Iran historically shared concerns regarding Afghanistan, especially during the Taliban's first rule. Both opposed extremist domination and supported forces that resisted Pakistan-backed Taliban influence. After 2001, both supported reconstruction in Afghanistan, though through different methods. India invested in infrastructure, education, health, Parliament building, dams, roads and humanitarian assistance. Iran focused on western Afghanistan, trade, refugees, Shia communities, water and border security. Their interests overlapped in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary for terrorism.

The Taliban's return in 2021 created a new challenge. India had to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy without formally recognizing the Taliban regime. Iran also had to deal with the Taliban because of geography, refugees, water disputes, border security and trade. Both countries worry about Daesh/ISIS-Khorasan, narcotics, extremist ideology and instability. Yet their policies cannot be identical because Iran shares a border with Afghanistan, while India's access is indirect. This creates both convergence and divergence.

Afghanistan instability affects Chabahar directly. India has used Chabahar for humanitarian supplies and access to Afghanistan, but long-term commercial use depends on security, road conditions, customs systems, political acceptance and Afghan market demand. If Afghan territory is insecure, transporters and traders hesitate. If governance is uncertain, contracts become unreliable. If extremist groups gain strength, regional trade suffers. Connectivity requires *predictable territory*.

Afghanistan is also linked with terrorism. India fears that anti-India terrorist groups may find space in Afghan territory or gain ideological support from extremist networks. Iran fears extremist spillover, attacks on Shia communities, border militancy and narcotics. These concerns justify India–

Iran security consultations. However, sensitive intelligence cooperation remains limited because of each country's other relationships and domestic considerations.

Refugees and humanitarian crises also matter. Iran has hosted large Afghan refugee populations for decades. Instability in Afghanistan increases pressure on Iran's economy and society. India, while geographically separated, remains concerned about humanitarian suffering and the regional consequences of instability. Humanitarian cooperation through Chabahar can therefore become a constructive India–Iran area.

Water issues add another dimension for Iran. Disputes over Helmand River water have periodically created tension between Iran and Afghan authorities. While this is not directly an Indian issue, instability around Iran's eastern border affects the wider environment in which Chabahar operates. India must understand such Iranian concerns because they shape Tehran's Afghanistan policy.

India's policy should support a stable, inclusive, peaceful and terrorism-free Afghanistan. It should coordinate with Iran where interests overlap, especially on humanitarian aid, connectivity, counter-terrorism assessment and development. However, India must avoid legitimizing extremist rule without conditions. This requires *pragmatic engagement without strategic naivety*.

In conclusion, Afghanistan instability remains a major challenge for India–Iran relations because it affects security, connectivity, terrorism, refugees and Chabahar's utility. In elevated geopolitical language, Afghanistan is the *unstable continental passage through which India–Iran strategic ambition must travel toward Central Asia*.

19.2.2 Pakistan Factor

The Pakistan factor is central to India–Iran relations because Pakistan blocks India's direct land access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran. Geography makes Pakistan unavoidable, but politics makes it obstructive. India's inability to use Pakistani territory for overland trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia is one of the reasons Chabahar became strategically important. Iran offers India an alternative route, but Pakistan's role still shapes the regional environment.

For India, Pakistan is associated with cross-border terrorism, hostile diplomacy, Kashmir-related conflict, and obstruction of regional connectivity. Pakistan has often denied India overland access to Afghanistan. This has forced India to search for alternative routes through Iran. Chabahar is therefore not merely a port; it is India's answer to *geographical denial imposed by Pakistan*.

For Iran, Pakistan is a difficult but necessary neighbour. Iran shares a long border with Pakistan, especially through the Balochistan region. Iran faces concerns about cross-border militancy, smuggling, narcotics, sectarian violence and instability. At the same time, Iran cannot ignore Pakistan because of trade, border communities, security coordination and regional diplomacy. Therefore, Iran's view of Pakistan differs from India's. India sees Pakistan primarily through the lens of hostility and terrorism; Iran sees Pakistan through the lens of border management and necessary neighbourly engagement.

The Balochistan region is particularly sensitive. Pakistan's Balochistan and Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan are both affected by underdevelopment, militancy, smuggling and border insecurity. Attacks by militant groups have strained Iran–Pakistan ties at times. Such instability affects the security environment around Chabahar and Gwadar. India must monitor this carefully because both ports are located in strategically sensitive regions.

Gwadar and Chabahar are often compared. Gwadar is linked with China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and Chinese strategic interests. Chabahar is linked with India–Iran connectivity and access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The two ports are not identical, and they need not be enemies, but geopolitically they represent competing corridor visions. Gwadar strengthens China–Pakistan connectivity; Chabahar strengthens India–Iran–Afghanistan–Central Asia connectivity. This creates *port-based strategic competition*.

Pakistan also affects India–Iran security cooperation. Iran may not want to antagonize Pakistan excessively, while India may want Iran to understand Pakistan's role in terrorism and transit obstruction. Iran's need to manage Pakistan limits how far it can align with India on Pakistan-related issues. India must therefore avoid unrealistic expectations. Iran is a partner, not an anti-Pakistan instrument.

At the same time, Pakistan's instability can create opportunities for India–Iran cooperation. If Pakistan remains unreliable for regional trade, Chabahar becomes more important. If Afghanistan needs access independent of Pakistan, Iran's route gains value. If Central Asian states seek diversified routes, India–Iran connectivity becomes attractive. Thus, Pakistan's obstruction increases the strategic relevance of Iran.

India's response should be to strengthen Chabahar, improve INSTC, develop maritime connectivity, build Central Asian partnerships and maintain diplomatic dialogue with Iran. India should not depend on Pakistan's goodwill for westward access. It must create *corridor autonomy* through Iran and the sea.

In conclusion, the Pakistan factor is both a challenge and a reason for India–Iran cooperation. It blocks direct access but increases the value of Iranian routes. In refined language, Pakistan is the *geographical obstruction that makes Iran indispensable to India's westward strategic imagination*.

19.2.3 China's Growing Role

China's growing role is one of the most important regional challenges in India–Iran relations. China has become a major economic, energy, diplomatic and strategic actor in West Asia, Iran and Pakistan. It imports large quantities of oil from the region, invests in infrastructure, supports the Belt and Road Initiative, maintains deep ties with Pakistan, and has expanded relations with Iran through long-term cooperation frameworks. For India, China's role creates both competition and concern.

China's relationship with Iran has deepened because of sanctions. When Western countries and many Asian companies reduced engagement with Iran, China became one of Iran's most important economic partners and oil buyers. China can tolerate sanctions risk more than many private firms and can use state-backed mechanisms to sustain engagement. Iran values China because it offers diplomatic protection, market access and strategic support against Western pressure. However, for India, this raises concern that Iran may become too dependent on China.

The 25-year China–Iran cooperation framework has strategic significance. Although many details remain opaque, the agreement symbolizes long-term Chinese interest in Iran's energy, infrastructure, technology and regional role. If China gains deeper influence over Iranian ports, railways,

telecommunications, energy fields or digital infrastructure, India's strategic space in Iran may narrow. India must therefore remain present in Iran so that China does not become the only major Asian partner of Tehran.

China's relationship with Pakistan makes the challenge more serious. CPEC connects China with Pakistan and Gwadar. India objects to CPEC because it passes through Indian territory under Pakistan's illegal occupation. Beyond sovereignty, India is concerned that CPEC and Gwadar may give China long-term strategic leverage in the Arabian Sea. If China's role in Pakistan and Iran grows simultaneously, India's western strategic environment becomes more complex.

Gwadar and Chabahar again matter. Gwadar, supported by China and Pakistan, is located near the Gulf of Oman and not far from Chabahar. China and Pakistan present Gwadar as a regional connectivity hub. India views Chabahar as a way to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia independently. If China's financial power accelerates Gwadar while India's Chabahar progress remains slow, India's corridor strategy may suffer. This is a competition of *execution, not merely intention*.

China's diplomatic role in the Gulf and Iran has also grown. China helped broker the Saudi–Iran rapprochement in 2023 and has continued to present itself as a diplomatic actor in West Asia. This shows that China is no longer only an economic actor; it is entering regional diplomacy. India must recognize that West Asia is becoming part of China's broader strategic outreach. India's answer should be not anxiety alone but deeper, faster and more credible engagement.

China's growing role also affects Iran's bargaining position with India. If India delays projects or reduces trade, Iran may turn more toward China. If China offers financing and infrastructure while India offers only statements, Tehran may prioritize Beijing. Therefore, India must convert goodwill into delivery. Strategic presence requires investment, logistics, trade and regular high-level engagement.

However, Iran may not want complete dependence on China. Iranian nationalism, civilizational pride and strategic autonomy make Tehran interested in diversified partnerships. India can benefit from this if it remains credible. India offers Iran a large market, civilizational trust, access to South Asia, pharmaceutical supplies, food trade and an alternative Asian

partnership. India should present itself as a *balancing partner*, not a rival patron.

In conclusion, China's growing role is a major challenge because it may reduce India's influence in Iran, strengthen Pakistan-linked corridor politics and complicate Chabahar. India must respond through faster implementation, private-sector confidence, diplomatic continuity and strategic economic engagement. In elevated language, China's growing role is the *dragon-shaped shadow over India–Iran connectivity, demanding from India not rhetoric but disciplined geoeconomic execution*.

19.3 Economic Challenges

Economic challenges are among the most visible weaknesses in India–Iran relations. The two countries possess strong economic complementarity, yet trade remains far below potential. Oil trade has collapsed under sanctions. Banking channels are fragile. Payment systems are uncertain. Private-sector confidence is weak. Insurance and shipping face compliance concerns. Chabahar has not yet generated the cargo volumes expected of it. Thus, the economic relationship remains a *restricted partnership with unrealized capacity*.

Economic challenges are dangerous because they weaken the practical foundation of strategic relations. Civilizational ties create goodwill, but trade creates regular contact. If trade declines, business communities lose interest, banks withdraw, investors hesitate and the relationship becomes too dependent on official diplomacy. India–Iran relations need a stronger economic base if they are to remain durable.

The greatest immediate economic challenge is payment. Even when Indian exporters have goods to sell and Iranian importers have demand, the absence of reliable payment channels prevents trade. This makes payment problems the heart of economic difficulty.

19.3.1 Payment Problems

Payment problems are the most immediate economic challenge in India–Iran relations. Trade requires trust that goods shipped will be paid for and money transferred will reach the correct party. In the case of Iran, sanctions, banking restrictions, currency instability, compliance fears and blocked financial channels make payment uncertain. This uncertainty discourages exporters,

importers, banks, shipping companies and insurers. The result is *commercial hesitation*.

The problem is especially visible in non-oil trade. Indian exporters of rice, tea, sugar, pharmaceuticals, fruits, machinery and medical goods may receive orders from Iran, but they need safe settlement. If banks delay transactions or refuse to process payments, exporters face working-capital pressure. If Iranian importers cannot access currency or approved banking channels, shipments are delayed. Trade becomes unpredictable.

The rupee-based mechanism through banks such as UCO Bank provided partial relief in earlier periods. It allowed Iran to use rupee funds for imports from India. However, this mechanism depended partly on the existence of large Iranian rupee balances generated by oil sales to India. Once formal oil imports declined, the financial base of the mechanism weakened. A payment mechanism without enough funds becomes limited. This shows that payment systems must be linked with balanced trade flows.

Payment problems also affect humanitarian trade. Food and medicine may be legally allowed in many sanctions frameworks, but exporters still need banks willing to handle transactions. If a bank fears sanctions exposure because an Iranian counterparty may be linked to a designated entity, it may refuse the transaction. This creates a gap between *legal exemption* and *practical payment*. Humanitarian trade cannot function merely on legal permission; it needs operational banking.

Currency volatility adds another difficulty. Iran's currency has faced depreciation and instability due to sanctions, inflation and economic pressure. Iranian importers may find it difficult to commit to prices, arrange foreign exchange or make timely payments. Indian exporters may demand advance payment or guarantees, but such guarantees are difficult under banking restrictions. This creates a cycle of mistrust.

Small and medium enterprises suffer more severely than large firms. Large companies can hire compliance experts and diversify risk. Small exporters cannot afford legal complexity or delayed payment. If one Iran shipment fails, a small exporter may face serious financial stress. Therefore, payment problems limit participation and reduce trade diversity.

Payment problems also weaken Chabahar. A port corridor requires freight payments, customs charges, insurance, warehousing fees, equipment

contracts, shipping bills and commercial credit. If payments are uncertain, cargo volumes remain low. Therefore, solving payment problems is essential not only for commodity trade but also for connectivity. Chabahar's future depends on financial confidence as much as physical infrastructure.

India and Iran need a modern payment solution. This may include rupee settlement, escrow accounts, special-purpose banking channels, verified non-sanctioned banks, digital documentation, trade-credit insurance, government-backed guarantees, and clearer compliance guidance for humanitarian and permitted goods. Any mechanism must be transparent and lawful. India's financial reputation must not be compromised.

In conclusion, payment problems are the core economic challenge in India–Iran relations. They convert sanctions into everyday business difficulty and prevent economic complementarity from becoming trade reality. In refined economic language, payment problems are the *financial bottleneck through which India–Iran commerce must pass before diplomacy can become development*.

Concluding Observation

The major challenges in India–Iran relations are serious, multilayered and persistent. Externally, U.S. sanctions, Iran–Israel conflict and Gulf rivalries limit India's freedom of action. Regionally, Afghanistan instability, Pakistan's obstruction and China's growing role complicate India's strategic use of Iran as a corridor. Economically, payment problems prevent trade from achieving its potential. These challenges explain why India–Iran relations often appear promising in diplomatic language but constrained in practical execution.

Yet challenges do not eliminate the relationship's importance. They reveal the need for a more sophisticated policy. India must preserve strategic autonomy, protect Chabahar, develop sanctions-resilient payment mechanisms, strengthen non-oil trade, deepen cultural and academic ties, consult Iran on Afghanistan, reassure Gulf and Israeli partners, and remain alert to China's expanding role. The future of India–Iran relations will depend not on sentiment alone, but on *strategic patience, financial innovation, diplomatic balance and geoeconomic execution*.

19.3.2 Low Trade Volume

Low trade volume is one of the most visible economic challenges in India–Iran relations. The two countries possess strong economic complementarity, yet the actual volume of trade remains far below its natural potential. India is a large and rapidly expanding economy with enormous demand for energy, fertilizers, petrochemicals, minerals, dry fruits, connectivity routes and strategic markets. Iran is a resource-rich, geographically important and historically connected country that requires rice, tea, pharmaceuticals, food items, machinery, agricultural goods, technology, medical products and services. In ordinary economic logic, such complementarity should have produced a vigorous trade relationship. Instead, the relationship remains *commercially under-realized*.

The decline in trade volume is primarily linked with the collapse of Indian crude-oil imports from Iran after the tightening of U.S. sanctions. Earlier, Iranian oil created a large trade base and gave the relationship strong economic weight. When oil imports fell sharply, total bilateral trade also contracted. Non-oil trade continued, but rice, tea, fruits, pharmaceuticals and dry fruits could not compensate for the loss of high-value energy trade. Thus, India–Iran commerce moved from a *hydrocarbon-heavy relationship* to a much smaller *food-pharma-fruit relationship*.

Low trade volume should not be interpreted as absence of demand. Iran continues to need Indian basmati rice, tea, medicines, sugar, fruits, agricultural products and selected industrial goods. India continues to have demand for Iranian dry fruits, fruits, petrochemicals, fertilizers, energy and minerals. The problem lies in sanctions, banking restrictions, shipping uncertainty, insurance difficulties, lack of private-sector confidence and weak logistical regularity. In other words, the demand exists, but the channels are obstructed. This is a classic case of *latent trade trapped by geopolitical constraint*.

Another reason for low trade volume is the absence of predictable payment mechanisms. Trade grows when exporters trust that they will be paid and importers trust that goods will arrive without legal interruption. In the India–Iran case, both sides face uncertainty. Indian exporters worry about delayed payments from Iranian buyers, while Iranian importers face currency pressure and limited foreign-exchange access. Banks hesitate to process transactions

due to compliance fear. This produces a culture of commercial caution. Traders prefer safer markets, even if Iranian demand is attractive.

Low trade volume also reflects the limited participation of the private sector. Governments may sign agreements and speak of historical friendship, but traders, banks, shipping companies, insurers and investors decide whether commerce actually expands. Many Indian private firms remain cautious because Iran-related transactions may create legal, reputational and financial risk. This is why state-level goodwill has not fully translated into business-level enthusiasm. The result is a *state-supported but business-hesitant relationship*.

The decline in trade also weakens political trust. Regular trade creates continuous communication among merchants, banks, ports, ministries and business chambers. When trade declines, the relationship becomes over-dependent on political symbolism and strategic rhetoric. Civilizational friendship remains important, but economic contact gives it daily relevance. Without sufficient trade, India–Iran relations risk becoming *strategically important but commercially thin*.

Low trade volume also reduces Chabahar's economic momentum. A port becomes successful when cargo moves through it regularly. If bilateral trade remains small and transit cargo is limited, the port's commercial viability remains below potential. Therefore, increasing trade volume is essential not only for the bilateral economy but also for the success of India's wider connectivity strategy through Iran. Chabahar requires cargo; cargo requires trade; trade requires banking and logistics.

India and Iran must therefore focus on realistic sectors that can expand even under difficult conditions. These include pharmaceuticals, basmati rice, tea, processed foods, dry fruits, fruits, medical equipment, agricultural machinery, fertilizers, petrochemicals where legally possible, information technology, education, tourism and health services. A sectoral approach is more practical than broad declarations. Trade revival should begin with *sanctions-resilient commodities* and gradually expand into larger sectors if legal conditions improve.

Business chambers must also be strengthened. The Federation of Indian Export Organisations, Indian chambers of commerce, Iranian trade bodies, port authorities, export councils, pharmaceutical associations, rice exporters,

tea boards and logistics companies should be brought into structured dialogue. They need clear information about payment channels, verified buyers, documentation, shipping, insurance and dispute resolution. Trade cannot grow through diplomatic language alone; it requires *commercial architecture*.

In conclusion, low trade volume is a major challenge because it prevents India–Iran relations from realizing their natural economic depth. The problem is not lack of complementarity but lack of confidence, payment clarity and sanctions-free operational space. In elevated economic language, low trade volume is the *compressed expression of a relationship whose commercial potential remains imprisoned within sanctions, uncertainty and logistical hesitation*.

19.3.3 Infrastructure Delay

Infrastructure delay is another serious challenge in India–Iran relations. The strategic value of Iran for India lies largely in connectivity: Chabahar Port, access to Afghanistan, links with Central Asia, and integration with the International North–South Transport Corridor. However, infrastructure projects require timely execution, financing, equipment, legal clarity, political coordination, administrative efficiency and cargo generation. When these conditions are weak, projects remain slow. Infrastructure delay therefore converts strategic imagination into practical frustration.

Chabahar is the most important example. India has viewed Chabahar as a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan and opening a maritime-continental route through Iran. The port has immense strategic value, but its implementation has been slower than India's ambitions. Sanctions, contract delays, equipment procurement difficulties, banking hesitation, Iranian administrative complexity, Afghanistan instability and private-sector caution have all affected its progress. Chabahar has remained a symbol of strategic aspiration, but its full commercial transformation has been delayed. This is the problem of *corridor under-execution*.

Infrastructure delay is damaging because corridors are competitive. China's Belt and Road projects, CPEC and Gwadar have created a fast-moving regional infrastructure environment. If India's projects move slowly, India loses strategic visibility and commercial credibility. In corridor politics, delay itself becomes a form of defeat. A route that remains underdeveloped cannot

attract traders, investors or regional partners. Therefore, India must treat infrastructure execution as *geopolitical credibility*.

The Chabahar–Zahedan railway has also reflected the difficulty of turning corridor plans into operational systems. Railways are essential because ports require hinterland connectivity. Without rail and road links, a port cannot become a true gateway. India's interest in connecting Chabahar with Afghanistan and Central Asia depends upon inland routes. Delays in rail connectivity reduce the port's value and weaken India's access strategy. A port without rail integration remains a *door without a corridor*.

Infrastructure delay also arises from sanctions-related procurement problems. Port equipment, cranes, banking services, insurance, technology components and contractor payments may all become complicated under sanctions. Even if a project is politically protected, companies may fear future sanctions exposure. Such fear slows tendering, procurement and execution. Infrastructure is not built only by governments; it requires firms willing to work. Sanctions reduce such willingness.

Administrative coordination is another issue. India and Iran have different bureaucratic systems, legal procedures, port rules, customs methods and commercial expectations. Without smooth coordination, project deadlines slip. Committees may meet, but execution may lag. Infrastructure projects need project-management discipline, clear responsibilities, timelines, dispute resolution and local-level operational authority. Grand diplomacy must be supported by *micro-level administrative efficiency*.

Afghanistan instability also affects infrastructure momentum. If the route to Afghanistan is insecure or politically uncertain, traders may hesitate to use Chabahar. If cargo volumes remain low, the economic incentive for rapid infrastructure expansion weakens. Thus, infrastructure delay is not only a construction issue; it is linked with regional stability and market confidence. Corridors require peace.

Infrastructure delay also affects Iran's perception of India. Tehran may feel that India speaks of Chabahar's importance but moves slowly because of U.S. pressure or excessive caution. India, on the other hand, may feel that Iran's sanctions environment and administrative conditions make rapid progress difficult. This mutual frustration can create a *perception gap*. Managing this gap requires honest communication and visible delivery.

India must respond by focusing on executable commitments. Instead of announcing many large projects without clarity, India should prioritize a few high-impact tasks: improving cargo handling at Shahid Beheshti Terminal, ensuring regular shipping links from Indian ports, developing warehousing and cold storage, supporting customs digitalization, encouraging Indian exporters to use the route, and coordinating with Afghanistan and Central Asian partners. Implementation should be *measurable, phased and commercially grounded*.

In conclusion, infrastructure delay is a major challenge because it weakens India's connectivity strategy and reduces Iran's confidence in India as an implementation partner. Chabahar and related corridors must move from symbolism to sustained commercial use. In refined geoeconomic language, infrastructure delay is the *slow erosion of strategic possibility through the attrition of time, sanctions, bureaucracy and insufficient execution*.

19.4 Diplomatic Challenges

Diplomatic challenges in India–Iran relations arise from policy differences, trust deficit and the gap between promises and implementation. India and Iran do not have hostile relations, but they do not always share identical priorities. Their friendship is real, but it is complicated by different strategic environments. India must balance Iran with the United States, Israel, Gulf Arab states and the Indo-Pacific framework. Iran must balance India with China, Pakistan, Russia, the Gulf, the United States and its own revolutionary foreign-policy identity. These different compulsions create diplomatic complexity.

The relationship often suffers from *asymmetry of expectation*. Iran expects India to act with greater strategic autonomy, resist U.S. sanctions pressure, maintain energy imports, invest in Chabahar and support Iran in international forums. India expects Iran to understand its relations with the United States, Israel and Gulf states, provide stable conditions for Chabahar, avoid excessive closeness with Pakistan and China, and cooperate on connectivity and regional security. Both expectations are understandable, but they do not always align.

Diplomatic challenges are also intensified by external crises. Iran–Israel conflict, U.S.–Iran sanctions, Afghanistan instability, Gulf tensions and China–Pakistan corridor politics repeatedly test India–Iran understanding.

Each crisis generates statements, pressures, misunderstandings and recalibrations. Diplomacy becomes a continuous exercise in *damage control and reassurance*.

The greatest challenge is to keep the relationship steady without overpromising. India and Iran often describe their ties in civilizational language, but modern economic and strategic cooperation requires implementation. If rhetoric is high and delivery is low, disappointment grows. Therefore, diplomacy must become more realistic, institutional and execution-oriented.

In conclusion, diplomatic challenges do not make India–Iran relations impossible; they make them delicate. The relationship requires careful language, frequent consultations, respect for each other’s compulsions and practical follow-through. In elevated diplomatic language, India–Iran diplomacy is a *craft of preserving civilizational friendship within a field of strategic divergence*.

19.4.1 Policy Differences

Policy differences are natural in India–Iran relations because both countries are sovereign states with distinct strategic priorities. India is a rising Indo-Pacific power with strong relations with the United States, Israel, Gulf Arab states, Russia, Europe, Japan and Southeast Asia. Iran is a sanctioned West Asian power with a revolutionary identity, difficult relations with the United States and Israel, close ties with some regional non-state actors, and increasing dependence on China and Russia. These different positions create policy divergence.

The first major policy difference concerns the United States. India views the United States as an important strategic partner in defence, technology, education, trade, maritime security and Indo-Pacific balance. Iran views the United States as a hostile power responsible for sanctions, military pressure and interference. This difference affects India–Iran relations because Iran may expect India to resist U.S. pressure more openly, while India must protect its larger global partnership with Washington. This is a structural divergence.

The second policy difference concerns Israel. India has developed strong defence, technology, agriculture and security cooperation with Israel. Iran considers Israel a principal adversary. India cannot reduce its Israel relationship to satisfy Iran, and Iran cannot accept Israel as an ordinary

regional actor. India's solution is de-hyphenation: relations with Israel are pursued for Indian security and technology needs, while Iran is engaged for connectivity, civilization and regional access. Yet Iran may still view India–Israel closeness with suspicion. This is a *sensitivity embedded in triangular diplomacy*.

The third policy difference concerns Gulf Arab states. India has deep energy, diaspora, trade and investment relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. Iran has had rivalry, mistrust or fluctuating relations with several Gulf Arab states. India cannot allow Iran relations to damage Gulf ties because millions of Indians live there and India's energy security depends on the Gulf. Iran may understand this, but it may still watch India–Gulf–Israel cooperation carefully.

The fourth policy difference concerns Afghanistan. India and Iran share concerns about terrorism, extremism and instability, but their practical policies differ. Iran shares a border with Afghanistan and must engage the Taliban regime more directly. India's access is indirect, and its concerns include anti-India terrorism and Pakistan's influence. Both countries want a stable Afghanistan, but their tools and compulsions differ. This creates partial convergence rather than complete alignment.

The fifth policy difference concerns Pakistan. India views Pakistan as an adversarial state linked with terrorism and obstruction of regional connectivity. Iran views Pakistan as a difficult but unavoidable neighbour. Tehran cannot adopt India's entire Pakistan policy because it shares a border with Pakistan and must manage cross-border security, trade and diplomacy. India must understand Iran's neighbourhood compulsion, but Iran must also understand India's terrorism concerns. This is a *neighbourhood asymmetry*.

The sixth policy difference concerns China. India sees China as its principal long-term strategic competitor. Iran sees China as a major economic partner, oil buyer and diplomatic shield under sanctions. India is concerned that China's growing role in Iran may reduce Indian influence and strengthen China–Pakistan corridor politics. Iran, however, may view China as necessary due to Western pressure. This creates another strategic divergence.

Policy differences also exist on sanctions, nuclear issues, regional militias, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and global alignments. India generally prefers moderation, dialogue and non-interventionist language. Iran often uses

sharper anti-Western and anti-Israel rhetoric. India's foreign policy is shaped by multi-alignment; Iran's by resistance diplomacy and sanctions survival. The two can cooperate, but they cannot become identical.

In conclusion, policy differences are real but manageable. They do not require India and Iran to abandon cooperation; they require both to avoid unrealistic expectations. In refined diplomatic language, policy differences are the *structural dissimilarities that demand mature compartmentalization rather than emotional disappointment*.

19.4.2 Trust Deficit

Trust deficit is a subtle but important diplomatic challenge in India–Iran relations. It does not mean that India and Iran are enemies; rather, it means that both sides sometimes doubt the other's reliability, priorities or strategic courage. Trust deficit emerges when expectations are not fulfilled, promises are delayed, votes disappoint, projects slow down, or partners appear too close to rivals. In India–Iran relations, trust deficit has accumulated gradually through sanctions, Chabahar delays, oil-import stoppage, IAEA voting, China's role, Pakistan sensitivities and India's relations with the United States and Israel.

From Iran's perspective, India has sometimes appeared too cautious under U.S. pressure. Tehran may believe that India values Iran strategically but hesitates when Washington applies sanctions. The reduction of oil imports, slow progress on some projects and India's votes at international forums have created Iranian disappointment at different moments. Iran may ask: if India considers Iran important, why does it not act with greater boldness? This question reveals the Iranian side of the trust deficit.

From India's perspective, Iran sometimes appears too close to China and unable or unwilling to fully insulate India's interests from China–Pakistan dynamics. India may also worry about Iran's regional posture, tensions with Israel and the United States, and uncertainty in Iranian policy caused by internal political factions. Indian policymakers may ask: if India invests in Iran, will Iran provide stable conditions, or will sanctions and regional conflict repeatedly disrupt the partnership? This question reveals the Indian side of the trust deficit.

Trust deficit also arises from Chabahar. India has repeatedly affirmed the importance of Chabahar, but progress has often been slower than expected.

Iran may interpret delays as lack of seriousness or fear of sanctions. India may interpret delays as the result of legal constraints, Iranian administrative complexity and sanctions risk. Both interpretations contain some truth. The result is mutual frustration. Chabahar is therefore both a symbol of cooperation and a test of trust.

Energy trade has also affected trust. Iran was once a significant oil supplier to India. The stoppage of formal oil imports damaged the economic foundation of relations. India saw the decision as a sanctions-driven necessity; Iran may have seen it as abandonment under pressure. Energy trade is not merely commercial; it creates strategic confidence. Its interruption weakened the relationship's material trust.

Trust deficit is also psychological. India and Iran often use warm civilizational language, but modern diplomacy requires practical delivery. When rhetoric is high and action is limited, disappointment grows. Repeated disappointment creates caution. Caution then reduces ambition. This cycle must be broken through visible implementation.

The solution is not emotional reassurance alone. Trust must be rebuilt through institutions. Regular foreign-office consultations, national security dialogues, Chabahar working groups, banking committees, business councils, academic exchanges and crisis communication mechanisms can reduce suspicion. Trust grows when contact becomes routine, not occasional. Institutionalization is the antidote to uncertainty.

Transparency is also important. India should clearly explain its sanctions constraints, U.S. relationship and balancing compulsions to Iran. Iran should clearly explain its China and Pakistan ties, internal procedures and expectations to India. Ambiguity breeds suspicion. Honest conversation may not remove differences, but it can reduce misinterpretation. This is *diplomatic candour*.

In conclusion, trust deficit is a real challenge, but it can be managed through delivery, transparency and regular dialogue. India and Iran must understand that neither can fully satisfy the other's expectations, but both can remain reliable within defined areas. In elevated language, trust deficit is the *invisible diplomatic fog that can be cleared only by consistent action, institutional contact and sober recognition of each other's compulsions*.

19.4.3 Gap Between Promise and Implementation

The gap between promise and implementation is perhaps the most damaging diplomatic challenge in India–Iran relations. The relationship is rich in declarations, joint statements, civilizational language, strategic references and ambitious projects. However, many promises have moved slowly, especially in trade expansion, energy cooperation, banking solutions, Chabahar connectivity, rail links and private investment. This creates a credibility problem. A relationship cannot live forever on potential; it requires delivery.

The gap is visible in Chabahar. For years, Chabahar has been described as a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, a pillar of India's connectivity strategy and a symbol of India–Iran cooperation. Yet its progress has been slower than the strategic discourse around it. Cargo volumes, private-sector participation, hinterland connectivity and integration with INSTC have not reached the level expected. The project remains important, but implementation has lagged behind imagination. This is the problem of *symbolic overloading and operational under-delivery*.

The gap is also visible in trade. India and Iran repeatedly speak of expanding commerce, but trade remains low. Business communities still face payment difficulties, banking hesitation, insurance problems and sanctions fear. Without solving these practical problems, trade targets remain rhetorical. The promise of trade expansion must be supported by payment channels, verified buyers, commercial arbitration, shipping services and export-credit support.

Energy cooperation shows another gap. Iran has vast oil and gas resources, and India has huge energy demand. This appears to be a natural partnership. Yet sanctions, pricing issues, pipeline politics, LNG challenges, payment problems and geopolitical pressure have repeatedly blocked major energy projects. The Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline remained unrealized; Farzad-B and other energy possibilities faced difficulty; oil imports were halted under sanctions pressure. Energy potential remains immense but underused.

Railway and inland connectivity also show implementation challenges. The value of Chabahar depends on roads and railways linking the port to Iran's interior, Afghanistan, Central Asia and INSTC routes. Delays in railway connectivity reduce the port's strategic value. A corridor is not completed by

signing a port contract; it requires continuous logistics integration. Implementation must connect port, road, rail, customs, banking and cargo.

The reasons for the gap are multiple. Sanctions create legal risk. Banks hesitate. Indian firms fear penalties. Iranian bureaucracy can be complex. Regional instability reduces confidence. Afghanistan's situation limits transit. U.S. pressure affects planning. India's own bureaucratic caution slows decisions. Iran's internal political and economic constraints also matter. Therefore, the implementation gap is not caused by one side alone; it is a combined product of *external pressure and internal execution weakness*.

The gap damages credibility. Iran may doubt India's seriousness. India may doubt Iran's capacity to provide stable conditions. Business communities may doubt both governments. Central Asian states may hesitate to rely on a corridor that appears slow. The wider region watches whether India can deliver on connectivity. Therefore, implementation is not merely technical; it is diplomatic reputation.

India and Iran must shift from declaration diplomacy to execution diplomacy. They should set realistic timelines, identify priority projects, create empowered implementation groups, publish progress indicators, resolve banking issues, encourage private-sector use of Chabahar, and connect the port with actual cargo demand. Diplomatic speeches must be matched by operational dashboards. This is *performance-based strategic partnership*.

A phased approach is necessary. First, stabilize payment mechanisms for permitted trade. Second, increase cargo through Chabahar. Third, improve warehousing, customs and shipping frequency. Fourth, integrate Afghanistan and Central Asian users. Fifth, prepare railway and INSTC linkages. Sixth, expand into energy and industrial projects when sanctions conditions permit. Such sequencing can reduce the gap between ambition and delivery.

In conclusion, the gap between promise and implementation is the most practical test of India–Iran relations. The two countries have vision, history and strategic logic, but they need execution. In refined diplomatic language, this gap is the *distance between civilizational rhetoric and geoeconomic reality, a distance that only disciplined implementation can overcome*.

Concluding Observation

Low trade volume, infrastructure delay, policy differences, trust deficit and the gap between promise and implementation reveal the inner weaknesses of India–Iran relations. These problems are not fatal, but they are serious. They show that the relationship cannot be sustained only by history, poetry, diplomacy and strategic necessity. It must be strengthened through trade expansion, payment solutions, infrastructure execution, honest dialogue and realistic expectations.

India and Iran must therefore adopt a mature framework. They should accept policy differences without allowing them to destroy cooperation. They should rebuild trust through action rather than sentiment. They should reduce the implementation gap through measurable projects. They should make Chabahar commercially active, not merely symbolically important. They should expand non-oil trade while preparing for future energy revival. In the broader framework of bilateral relations, the greatest challenge is not absence of friendship but the *persistent difficulty of converting friendship into durable, operational and mutually profitable partnership*.

Chapter 20:

Contemporary India–Iran Relations

Contemporary India–Iran relations occupy a significant place in the strategic architecture of twenty-first-century Asia. The relationship is neither a conventional alliance nor a casual diplomatic association. It is a complex, layered and historically rooted partnership shaped by *civilizational memory*, *geopolitical necessity*, *energy security*, *connectivity imperatives*, *Afghanistan concerns*, *Central Asian access*, *sanctions constraints*, *maritime strategy*, *regional instability* and *multi-aligned diplomacy*. In the contemporary period, India and Iran are compelled by geography and history to remain engaged, even when international pressures and regional rivalries make cooperation difficult.

The twenty-first century has transformed the logic of India–Iran relations. During the Cold War, India and Iran often stood on different sides of the global strategic divide because India followed non-alignment while Iran under the Shah was linked with the Western security architecture. After the Iranian Revolution, ideological and geopolitical complexities continued. However, after the end of the Cold War and especially after India's economic liberalization, the two countries rediscovered each other through new strategic needs: India required energy, access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and a partner in the western neighbourhood; Iran required markets, diplomatic diversification, Asian partners and economic outlets under sanctions. This produced a relationship of *renewed strategic convergence*.

In the contemporary era, three ideas define India–Iran relations. The first is *connectivity*. Chabahar Port, INSTC, Afghanistan access and Central Asian outreach make Iran indispensable to India's westward strategy. The second is *balancing*. India must engage Iran while maintaining deep relations with the United States, Israel and Gulf Arab states. The third is *resilience*. Despite sanctions, oil disruption, payment problems and geopolitical crises, the relationship has survived because it is supported by geography, civilization and strategic logic.

Modern India–Iran relations are also shaped by the wider transformation of global order. The world is moving from unipolarity toward a more contested and multipolar structure. The rise of China, the return of Russia, the assertion of middle powers, the expansion of BRICS, the significance of SCO, and the restructuring of West Asian diplomacy have all affected Iran’s choices and India’s options. In this environment, both India and Iran seek strategic space. India calls this approach *strategic autonomy* and *multi-alignment*; Iran describes its approach through resistance, Asian partnerships and diversification away from Western pressure.

Contemporary India–Iran relations therefore must not be judged only by trade volume. Trade has declined sharply because of sanctions and the loss of oil imports, but strategic relevance remains high. A relationship may be commercially constrained and still geopolitically important. Iran remains a *strategic gateway*, and India remains a *civilizational and economic partner* for Iran. This chapter examines the relationship in the twenty-first century, recent diplomatic engagements, high-level visits, Joint Commission Meetings and Chabahar discussions.

20.1 India–Iran Relations in the 21st Century

India–Iran relations in the twenty-first century have been marked by continuity, interruption and recalibration. The continuity comes from history, geography and civilizational affinity. The interruption comes from sanctions, the nuclear issue, U.S.–Iran hostility, regional conflicts and banking restrictions. The recalibration comes from India’s rise as a major power, Iran’s turn toward Asia, China’s expansion, Afghanistan’s instability and the changing West Asian order. The relationship has therefore evolved through a pattern of *engagement under constraint*.

The early twenty-first century was particularly important because India and Iran attempted to give strategic form to their civilizational relationship. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s 2001 visit to Iran and the Tehran Declaration, followed by President Mohammad Khatami’s 2003 visit to India and the New Delhi Declaration, created a framework for wider cooperation. These documents reflected a desire to strengthen political dialogue, economic cooperation, regional consultation and civilizational understanding. They were not merely ceremonial; they represented a post-Cold War effort to create *strategic maturity*.

The next major phase came with India's growing interest in connectivity. Pakistan's denial of overland access to Afghanistan and Central Asia forced India to seek alternative routes. Iran's location made it indispensable. Chabahar became the centrepiece of this thinking. The 2016 visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Iran and the signing of the trilateral agreement among India, Iran and Afghanistan marked a major moment in twenty-first-century India–Iran relations. It connected diplomacy with infrastructure and transformed Iran into a key pillar of India's *westward connectivity doctrine*.

At the same time, sanctions repeatedly limited the relationship. India's energy imports from Iran suffered because of U.S. pressure, especially after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018. Payment systems became difficult. Banks hesitated. Trade declined. Indian companies became cautious. Thus, the relationship experienced an uncomfortable contradiction: the more India needed Iran strategically for connectivity, the harder it became to engage Iran economically because of sanctions. This is the central paradox of contemporary relations.

Afghanistan has remained a major strategic bridge. India and Iran both oppose terrorism and extremism, both worry about instability in Afghanistan, and both value routes that reduce dependence on Pakistan. After the Taliban's return in 2021, both countries adjusted their policies pragmatically while remaining concerned about terrorism, refugees, minorities, narcotics and regional stability. Afghanistan continues to make India–Iran dialogue necessary, even if both sides do not share identical methods.

The twenty-first century has also seen India's West Asia policy become more complex. India now maintains strong relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman and the United States, while also seeking to preserve Iran ties. This makes India's Iran policy part of a wider regional balancing strategy. India does not want to be trapped in Iran–Israel hostility, Iran–U.S. confrontation or Gulf rivalries. Therefore, India's policy has become *de-hyphenated*, issue-based and interest-driven.

Iran's own policy has also changed. Under sanctions and Western pressure, Iran has increasingly sought partnerships with China, Russia, India and multilateral Asian platforms. Its membership in SCO and BRICS reflects its desire to escape isolation and embed itself in non-Western institutions. For India, this creates both opportunity and challenge. India can engage Iran through Asian platforms, but it must also monitor China's growing role in

Iran. Contemporary India–Iran relations are therefore located within the wider politics of *Asian multipolarity*.

In conclusion, India–Iran relations in the twenty-first century are defined by strategic relevance, economic constraint and diplomatic balancing. They are not as commercially strong as they could be, but they remain geopolitically indispensable. In refined language, the contemporary relationship is a *civilizationally rooted strategic partnership operating under the pressure of sanctions, corridors and regional turbulence*.

20.1.1 Strategic Relevance of Iran

Iran's strategic relevance for India is profound and multidimensional. It arises from geography, energy, connectivity, regional security, maritime access, Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and Eurasia. Iran is not merely another West Asian country for India; it is a *geostrategic hinge* connecting the Indian Ocean with the Gulf, the Caucasus, Central Asia and continental Eurasia. No serious Indian strategy toward the western neighbourhood can ignore Iran.

The first strategic relevance of Iran lies in connectivity. Pakistan blocks India's direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran provides India with an alternative route through Chabahar and onward corridors. Chabahar allows India to reach Afghanistan without depending on Pakistani territory. It also provides possibilities for trade with Central Asian republics. Therefore, Iran is indispensable to India's effort to overcome *continental access denial*.

The second relevance lies in Afghanistan. India and Iran have both been affected by Afghan instability. Both have concerns about terrorism, extremism, narcotics and refugee flows, though the nature of their concerns differs. Iran has a border with Afghanistan and faces immediate consequences of instability; India faces strategic and security consequences through terrorism and Pakistan's influence. Iran's role in Afghanistan cannot be ignored by India because any durable Afghan policy requires regional coordination.

The third relevance lies in Central Asia. India has long sought deeper engagement with Central Asian republics for energy, minerals, trade, security and civilizational reasons. However, India's lack of land access through Pakistan has limited its reach. Iran's territory and transport systems provide India with a possible gateway. Chabahar and INSTC can help India connect

with Central Asia, the Caspian and Russia. Thus, Iran is a *corridor state* for India's Eurasian strategy.

The fourth relevance lies in energy. Although India's formal oil imports from Iran have declined under sanctions, Iran's long-term energy importance remains. It has large oil and gas reserves and potential in petrochemicals and fertilizers. India, as a major energy consumer, benefits from supplier diversification. If sanctions ease or a stable legal mechanism emerges, Iran can again become an important part of India's energy calculus. Energy memory continues to shape strategic thinking.

The fifth relevance lies in maritime geography. Iran's coastline along the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman gives it influence over the maritime approaches to the Strait of Hormuz. India's energy flows and trade routes are connected with these waters. Stability in the Gulf and Gulf of Oman affects India's oil imports, LNG shipments, shipping insurance and diaspora safety. Therefore, Iran's maritime position gives it importance in India's *Indian Ocean–Persian Gulf security equation*.

The sixth relevance lies in balancing China and Pakistan. China's role in Pakistan through CPEC and Gwadar has strategic implications for India. If India is absent from Iran, China may gain additional space in the western corridor environment. Sustained India–Iran engagement helps India maintain strategic presence in a region where China and Pakistan are active. Iran gives India a platform for *counter-corridor diplomacy* without making the relationship explicitly anti-China or anti-Pakistan.

The seventh relevance lies in civilizational diplomacy. Persianate culture has deeply influenced India's language, literature, architecture, music, food and social traditions. Cultural memory creates emotional depth and soft-power trust. Iran is one of the few countries with which India can combine strategic engagement and civilizational language naturally. This gives the relationship diplomatic warmth.

In conclusion, Iran's strategic relevance for India is based on connectivity, Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy, maritime security, China–Pakistan balancing and cultural depth. In elevated geopolitical language, Iran is the *western strategic doorway through which India reaches beyond South Asia into the Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia*.

20.1.2 India's West Asia Policy

India's West Asia policy in the twenty-first century has become highly sophisticated. Earlier, India's policy toward the region was often viewed through energy, diaspora and Palestine. Today, it includes energy security, counter-terrorism, maritime security, investments, food security, technology, defence cooperation, infrastructure, diaspora welfare, connectivity, Israel relations, Gulf partnerships and Iran engagement. This transformation reflects India's rise as a major power and West Asia's importance to India's national interests.

India's West Asia policy is based on *de-hyphenation*. This means India does not allow its relationship with one regional actor to be automatically determined by that actor's rivalry with another. India cooperates with Israel in defence and technology, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in energy and investment, with Qatar in LNG, with Oman in maritime diplomacy, and with Iran in connectivity and regional access. This approach allows India to maximize relationships without joining regional blocs.

Iran occupies a special place in this policy because it provides India with something Gulf Arab states and Israel cannot provide: access to Afghanistan and Central Asia through Chabahar. Saudi Arabia and the UAE may be economically larger partners, and Israel may be a more advanced defence-technology partner, but Iran's geography is unique. India's West Asia policy therefore requires Iran as a *connectivity pillar*.

At the same time, India cannot allow Iran relations to damage its ties with Gulf Arab states, Israel or the United States. Millions of Indians live in the Gulf, India imports large quantities of energy from Gulf countries, and India has developed strong economic and strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Israel is important for defence and technology. The United States is crucial for global strategy. Therefore, India's Iran policy must remain balanced, careful and non-provocative.

India's West Asia policy is also shaped by crisis management. Conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, the Red Sea, Iran–Israel tensions and U.S.–Iran confrontation all affect India. India must protect citizens, monitor energy prices, maintain shipping security, and issue balanced statements. The widening of conflicts in West Asia repeatedly tests India's ability to remain

principled without becoming partisan. This is *crisis diplomacy under multi-alignment*.

India's policy also emphasizes economic corridors. The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, I2U2, Chabahar and INSTC show that India sees West Asia not only as an energy region but as a connectivity region. Iran is central to the eastern and northern connectivity route, while Gulf states are central to maritime, logistics, investment and West Asian economic corridors. India must therefore manage multiple corridor visions simultaneously.

In relation to Iran, India's West Asia policy must preserve strategic autonomy. India cannot simply follow U.S. policy on Iran because Indian interests are different. Nor can India ignore Western sanctions because Indian banks and companies operate in the global financial system. India must negotiate space for its interests, especially Chabahar, humanitarian trade, pharmaceuticals, food exports and regional consultations. This is *autonomy within constraint*.

In conclusion, India's West Asia policy is marked by de-hyphenation, multi-alignment, energy security, diaspora welfare, maritime stability and corridor diplomacy. Iran is a necessary component of this policy because of its geography and civilizational depth. In refined language, India's West Asia policy is the *diplomatic art of engaging adversarial regional actors without surrendering national autonomy or strategic balance*.

20.1.3 Iran's Asian Partnerships

Iran's Asian partnerships have become increasingly important in the twenty-first century. Under sanctions, Western pressure and regional rivalry, Iran has sought to diversify its external relations toward Asia. China, Russia, India, Central Asian states, Pakistan, Turkey and multilateral organizations such as SCO and BRICS have all become part of Iran's Asian diplomacy. Iran's "Look East" or Asian orientation is a response to isolation from the West, but it is also an assertion of Iran's identity as a major Asian civilization and regional power.

China is the most important Asian partner for Iran in economic terms. China has remained a major buyer of Iranian oil, an investor, a diplomatic supporter and a strategic interlocutor. The China–Iran comprehensive cooperation framework symbolizes Iran's attempt to secure long-term economic and political support under sanctions. For Iran, China offers market access, infrastructure possibilities and great-power backing. For India, however,

China's growing role in Iran creates concern because China is India's principal strategic competitor.

Russia has also become more important for Iran, especially after the Ukraine war and Russia's own confrontation with the West. Iran and Russia cooperate in energy, defence, diplomacy, sanctions resistance and regional politics. Their relationship is not without historical mistrust, but contemporary pressures have brought them closer. For India, which maintains relations with both Russia and Iran, this creates a complex Eurasian environment.

India occupies a different place in Iran's Asian partnerships. India is not as economically dominant as China in Iran, nor as militarily aligned with Iran as Russia may be in some areas. Yet India offers Iran something unique: a large market, civilizational trust, access to South Asian demand, pharmaceuticals, food supplies, Chabahar partnership and a non-Western relationship that is not based on domination. Iran's partnership with India can help Tehran avoid excessive dependence on China. This makes India a *balancing Asian partner*.

Iran's entry into SCO and BRICS strengthens its Asian orientation. SCO gives Iran a platform involving China, Russia, India, Pakistan and Central Asian states. BRICS gives Iran a wider non-Western economic and political platform. These memberships do not automatically solve Iran's economic problems, but they reduce diplomatic isolation and provide forums for engagement. For India, Iran's membership in these platforms creates opportunities for dialogue in multilateral settings.

Iran also maintains relations with Pakistan, though these are complicated by border security, Balochistan militancy, smuggling and regional politics. Iran cannot ignore Pakistan because of geography. India must understand this, but it must also remain alert to China–Pakistan–Iran interactions that may affect India's strategic space. Iran's Asian partnerships therefore contain both opportunity and caution for India.

Central Asia is another important dimension. Iran wants to be a transit route for Central Asian states to the sea, while India wants to reach Central Asia through Iran. This creates a convergence. Chabahar, INSTC and Iranian rail-road networks can connect India, Iran and Central Asia. Iran's Asian partnerships can therefore support India's connectivity ambitions if properly coordinated.

Iran's Asian orientation also reflects its search for economic survival. Sanctions have limited Iran's access to Western finance and technology. Asian partners provide markets, alternative payment mechanisms, political cover and diplomatic platforms. However, excessive dependence on any one partner may reduce Iran's autonomy. India can use this concern constructively by presenting itself as a reliable and balanced partner.

In conclusion, Iran's Asian partnerships are reshaping its foreign policy. China, Russia, India, SCO, BRICS and Central Asia all matter in Iran's contemporary strategy. India should engage this trend actively while protecting its interests. In elevated language, Iran's Asian partnerships represent Tehran's *eastward strategic reorientation in search of markets, legitimacy, corridors and autonomy under sanctions pressure*.

20.2 Recent Diplomatic Engagements

Recent diplomatic engagements show that India and Iran continue to invest in their relationship despite sanctions, regional conflicts and external pressure. The engagement has taken place through prime-ministerial meetings, foreign-minister-level visits, Joint Commission Meetings, Foreign Office Consultations, political consultations, security contacts, ministerial visits and Chabahar-related discussions. These mechanisms demonstrate that the relationship remains active, even when economic cooperation is constrained.

The most important feature of recent engagement is continuity. India and Iran have kept communication open across political transitions in Tehran, including after the death of President Ebrahim Raisi and the election of President Masoud Pezeshkian. India sent high-level representation to condolence and swearing-in events, and Prime Minister Modi met President Pezeshkian at the BRICS Summit. Such gestures are diplomatically significant because they signal respect and political continuity.

Recent engagements also show that Chabahar remains central. The long-term contract signed in May 2024 transformed Chabahar from a repeatedly renewed short-term arrangement into a more stable framework. Subsequent political meetings repeatedly reaffirmed its importance for Afghanistan, Central Asia and regional connectivity. Chabahar is therefore not merely a technical port issue; it is the political core of contemporary India–Iran engagement.

The Joint Commission Meeting mechanism has also regained importance. The 20th JCM in New Delhi in May 2025 allowed both sides to review trade, economic cooperation, agriculture, health, culture, connectivity and people-to-people ties. The signing of MoUs on medical-products regulation and customs cooperation indicated an attempt to build practical cooperation in areas less sensitive than oil and defence. This reflects a realistic approach: when major sectors are constrained, smaller but executable sectors become important.

Recent engagements also include security and regional discussions. Afghanistan, terrorism, West Asian conflicts, maritime security and regional stability remain important themes. India and Iran do not have identical perspectives, but regular dialogue helps prevent misunderstanding. The continuation of Foreign Office Consultations and political consultations supports this diplomatic stability.

In conclusion, recent diplomatic engagements reveal a relationship that is cautious but alive, constrained but persistent, and strategic but pragmatic. In refined diplomatic language, India–Iran engagement today is a *carefully maintained diplomatic bridge across sanctions, crises and competing regional alignments*.

20.2.1 High-Level Visits

High-level visits have played a major role in contemporary India–Iran relations. They provide political direction, renew confidence, signal continuity and help overcome bureaucratic hesitation. In a relationship frequently affected by external pressure, high-level engagement becomes especially important because it reassures both sides that the partnership remains valued at the highest political level.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016 was a landmark in contemporary relations. It produced the joint statement *Civilizational Connect, Contemporary Context* and witnessed the signing of the trilateral trade, transport and transit agreement among India, Iran and Afghanistan. This visit converted India's Iran policy into a connectivity strategy and gave Chabahar renewed political prominence. It was a moment when civilizational language and geoeconomic ambition came together.

President Hassan Rouhani's visit to India in February 2018 was another important event. The joint statement *Towards Prosperity Through Greater*

Connectivity emphasized trade, culture, connectivity and cooperation. This visit occurred at a time when India was still interested in sustaining energy ties and Chabahar cooperation, even as the sanctions environment remained uncertain. It reaffirmed Iran's importance in India's West Asia policy.

In recent years, high-level contacts have continued despite political turbulence. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Iran in January 2024. Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar visited Iran in May 2024 to attend the official condolence ceremony after the death of President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and other Iranian officials. Nitin Gadkari represented India at President Masoud Pezeshkian's swearing-in ceremony in July 2024. These visits reflected respect for Iran's political transition and India's desire to maintain continuity.

Prime Minister Modi's meeting with President Masoud Pezeshkian on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan in October 2024 was particularly important. It was their first meeting after President Pezeshkian assumed office. The leaders reviewed bilateral relations, welcomed Iran in the BRICS framework, reaffirmed the importance of Chabahar and discussed West Asian developments. This meeting showed that India wished to engage the new Iranian leadership at the earliest available opportunity.

The visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi to India in May 2025 for the 20th Joint Commission Meeting was also significant. It was an opportunity to reset practical cooperation, discuss trade and connectivity, and maintain high-level political communication. His engagements with Indian leadership and officials reflected Iran's interest in keeping India as an important Asian partner.

High-level visits are not only symbolic. They help unblock projects, authorize officials, reassure businesses and signal political seriousness. In India–Iran relations, where sanctions and bureaucracy often slow implementation, political direction from top leaders is necessary. Without high-level engagement, the relationship risks becoming trapped in technical delays.

However, visits must be followed by implementation. Diplomatic optics without delivery can create disappointment. Therefore, high-level visits should produce clear agendas, timelines, working groups and sectoral outcomes. The value of a visit lies not only in photographs and statements but

in the institutional momentum it creates. This is *visit diplomacy converted into execution diplomacy*.

In conclusion, high-level visits have sustained India–Iran relations through difficult periods. They reaffirm civilizational friendship, strategic relevance and political continuity. In refined language, high-level visits are the *ceremonial yet consequential instruments through which India and Iran renew confidence amid geopolitical turbulence*.

20.2.2 Joint Commission Meetings

Joint Commission Meetings are among the most important institutional mechanisms in India–Iran relations. Unlike occasional summit meetings, JCMs provide a structured forum for reviewing the entire relationship. They allow both sides to discuss trade, banking, customs, health, agriculture, culture, connectivity, consular matters, energy, technology, education and regional developments. The JCM is therefore a *diplomatic engine room*.

The JCM mechanism is important because India–Iran relations are multidimensional but complicated. Many issues require coordination among different ministries: foreign affairs, commerce, finance, ports, shipping, health, agriculture, customs, culture, education and energy. A Joint Commission brings these strands together. It prevents the relationship from becoming fragmented across bureaucracies.

The 20th India–Iran Joint Commission Meeting, held in New Delhi in May 2025, was significant because it came after major changes in Iran’s leadership and after the 2024 long-term Chabahar contract. Co-chaired by India’s External Affairs Minister and Iran’s Foreign Minister, it reviewed the broad spectrum of bilateral relations and attempted to advance cooperation in practical fields. Its significance lay not only in formal diplomacy but in restoring institutional rhythm.

The signing or exchange of MoUs on medical-products regulation and customs cooperation during the 2025 JCM reflected a realistic strategy. Under sanctions, large energy and investment projects remain difficult. Therefore, India and Iran need sectors where progress is possible. Medical products regulation can support pharmaceutical trade, while customs cooperation can improve trade facilitation and reduce procedural delays. These are modest but meaningful steps.

JCMs also allow both sides to discuss sensitive issues without public confrontation. Payment problems, banking channels, Chabahar implementation, trade barriers, detained fishermen or sailors, students, consular issues and regional concerns can be raised in a structured manner. This helps manage irritants before they become diplomatic disputes. Institutional diplomacy is a form of *preventive maintenance*.

The JCM also has a psychological function. It reassures both sides that the relationship is not dormant. Even when oil trade is low and sanctions persist, the existence of the JCM signals continuity. It tells business communities, ministries and regional partners that India and Iran remain engaged. This matters because perception influences commerce and diplomacy.

However, JCMs must avoid becoming ceremonial. Their success depends on follow-up. Minutes must be implemented; working groups must meet; timelines must be monitored; businesses must be informed; banking obstacles must be addressed. A JCM without follow-up becomes another layer of diplomatic rhetoric. Therefore, India and Iran should create a stronger review mechanism after every JCM.

In conclusion, Joint Commission Meetings provide institutional depth to India–Iran relations. They help convert political will into sectoral cooperation. In elevated diplomatic language, the JCM is the *institutional crucible in which India and Iran attempt to transform civilizational warmth and strategic necessity into practical policy outcomes*.

20.2.3 Chabahar Discussions

Chabahar discussions occupy the central place in contemporary India–Iran diplomatic engagement. No other project symbolizes India–Iran strategic cooperation as strongly as Chabahar. It connects maritime strategy, Afghanistan policy, Central Asian access, trade, regional development, sanctions diplomacy and India’s desire to overcome Pakistan’s transit blockade. Chabahar is therefore not merely an infrastructure project; it is the *geo-economic heart of contemporary India–Iran relations*.

The signing of the long-term contract in May 2024 between India Port Global Limited and Iran’s Ports and Maritime Organization gave Chabahar renewed importance. The contract provided a longer operational framework for the Shahid Beheshti Terminal and showed both sides’ commitment to making the

port functional. For India, it represented legal and operational continuity. For Iran, it showed that India remained committed despite sanctions pressure.

Chabahar discussions are closely linked with Afghanistan. India has used Chabahar as a route for humanitarian supplies and as a mechanism to maintain access to Afghanistan without relying on Pakistan. The port can support reconstruction, food supplies, medicines and commercial movement. In the post-2021 Afghan environment, Chabahar remains important because India's direct access remains limited. It provides India with *strategic humanitarian reach*.

Chabahar also connects India with Central Asia. Central Asian states are landlocked and interested in diversified access to the sea. If Chabahar becomes commercially efficient, it can provide them a route to the Indian Ocean. This would strengthen India–Central Asia trade and reduce excessive dependence on northern or China-linked routes. Chabahar thus has a regional role beyond India and Iran.

Chabahar discussions also involve INSTC. If Chabahar is integrated with Iranian roads, railways and Caspian routes, it can contribute to India's wider Eurasian connectivity. This requires coordination with Iran's rail network, customs systems, logistics providers and regional partners. Chabahar's future lies not only in port operations but in *multimodal integration*.

Sanctions remain the greatest obstacle. India has repeatedly had to negotiate space for Chabahar because the project is located in Iran. The United States has at times recognized the project's importance for Afghanistan and regional connectivity, but policy uncertainty persists. Banks, insurers and shipping companies remain cautious. Therefore, Chabahar discussions always include a legal and financial dimension. A port needs not only cranes and berths; it needs bankable confidence.

Commercial viability is another challenge. Chabahar must attract cargo. Regular shipping links, competitive tariffs, warehousing, cold storage, customs efficiency, insurance, trade promotion and private-sector participation are essential. If cargo remains limited, the port's strategic symbolism will exceed its economic reality. India and Iran must therefore focus on making Chabahar commercially attractive. The port must become a *working corridor*, not only a strategic phrase.

Diplomatically, Chabahar must be presented as inclusive. India should emphasize that Chabahar benefits Afghanistan, Central Asia and regional trade. It is not designed to destabilize any country. This framing helps reduce suspicion among external actors and strengthens the project's legitimacy. Inclusive connectivity is more defensible than competitive geopolitics.

In conclusion, Chabahar discussions are the core of contemporary India–Iran engagement. They connect geography with strategy and commerce with diplomacy. In refined geopolitical language, Chabahar is the *maritime hinge through which India's westward strategy turns toward Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia while preserving strategic autonomy from Pakistan's land barrier*.

Concluding Observation

Contemporary India–Iran relations are defined by strategic necessity under constraint. Iran remains vital to India because of Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy memory, maritime geography and civilizational depth. India remains valuable to Iran because it offers a large market, food and pharmaceutical supplies, cultural affinity, diplomatic diversification and an Asian partnership not entirely subordinate to China. Yet sanctions, Iran–Israel tensions, U.S. pressure, Gulf rivalries, Afghanistan instability and China's growing role complicate the relationship.

Recent diplomatic engagements show that both sides remain committed to dialogue. High-level visits, BRICS meetings, Joint Commission Meetings, Foreign Office Consultations and Chabahar discussions demonstrate continuing political will. The challenge is to convert this will into measurable outcomes. India and Iran must now move from *symbolic affirmation* to *operational consolidation*. In the larger framework of Indian foreign policy, contemporary India–Iran relations represent the *demanding art of sustaining civilizational friendship, strategic access and diplomatic balance in an era of sanctions, corridors and multipolar competition*.

20.3 Current Strategic Issues

Current India–Iran relations are shaped by a cluster of strategic issues that directly connect diplomacy with geography, energy, sanctions, conflict and national interest. These issues are not abstract matters of international relations; they affect ports, shipping routes, oil prices, insurance costs, Indian

citizens abroad, trade corridors, banking channels, private investment, Afghanistan access and India's wider West Asia policy. Contemporary India–Iran relations must therefore be understood as a relationship operating within a turbulent zone of *strategic compression*.

The first current strategic issue is Chabahar. For India, Chabahar is a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, a means of bypassing Pakistan, a maritime foothold in Iran's Gulf of Oman coast and a practical instrument of Eurasian connectivity. For Iran, it is a development project, a regional trade outlet and a symbol of partnership with a major Asian power. Yet sanctions threaten to reduce its operational freedom. Thus, Chabahar is simultaneously an opportunity and a vulnerability. It is India's *strategic gateway under sanctions pressure*.

The second issue is West Asian conflict. Iran's confrontation with Israel, tensions with the United States, conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf all affect India's regional diplomacy. India has relations with Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman and the United States. Therefore, every major conflict in West Asia compels India to practise careful balance. India's policy must protect its national interests without becoming trapped in regional hostility. This is *conflict management through calibrated neutrality*.

The third issue is energy and supply-chain risk. India's economy depends heavily on imported energy and maritime trade. The Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb and Suez route form an interconnected energy and logistics system. Any conflict involving Iran can raise oil prices, disrupt shipping, increase freight and insurance costs, and affect inflation in India. Thus, Iran is not only a political question for India; it is also an energy-security and supply-chain question.

The fourth issue is India's strategic autonomy. India must engage Iran without alienating the United States, Israel or Gulf Arab partners. It must comply with legal and financial realities without surrendering independent judgment. It must support Chabahar without appearing to undermine sanctions regimes. It must maintain energy resilience without depending excessively on one source. It must protect its citizens and business communities while preserving diplomatic flexibility. Contemporary India–Iran relations are therefore a practical test of *strategic autonomy in action*.

In conclusion, the current strategic issues in India–Iran relations reveal the complexity of twenty-first-century diplomacy. Ports, sanctions, conflicts, oil routes and supply chains are intertwined. In refined diplomatic language, India–Iran relations today stand at the intersection of *corridor diplomacy, sanctions management, maritime security and national-interest preservation*.

20.3.1 Chabahar and Sanctions

Chabahar is the most important contemporary strategic project between India and Iran. Its significance lies in geography, connectivity and autonomy. Located on Iran's south-eastern coast near the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar gives India a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia without dependence on Pakistan. It also offers Iran a chance to develop its eastern region and strengthen its role as a transit state. Therefore, Chabahar is not a mere port project; it is a *geo-economic instrument of strategic access*.

For India, Chabahar has three principal meanings. First, it provides an alternative route to Afghanistan. Second, it opens possibilities for trade with Central Asia. Third, it links India's maritime reach with continental Eurasian corridors. In the broader logic of Indian foreign policy, Chabahar reduces India's vulnerability to Pakistan's transit denial. It transforms the Arabian Sea into a platform for continental engagement. It is India's *maritime answer to continental obstruction*.

The long-term contract signed in 2024 gave Chabahar a stronger institutional foundation. It signalled that India and Iran wanted to move beyond short-term arrangements and create a durable operational framework. It also reassured Afghanistan and Central Asian states that India remained committed to regional connectivity. However, a contract alone cannot guarantee success. Ports require ships, cargo, banks, insurance, customs efficiency, hinterland roads, railways and commercial confidence. Chabahar's future depends upon the entire ecosystem of trade.

Sanctions are the greatest obstacle. U.S. sanctions on Iran affect banks, companies, insurers, logistics firms and investors. Even when Chabahar is understood as a regional connectivity project, private firms remain cautious because sanctions risk can be unpredictable. Banks fear penalties. Shipping companies fear legal exposure. Investors fear future policy change. The result is *sanctions-induced commercial hesitation*.

The revocation of the earlier Chabahar sanctions waiver created a renewed challenge for India. It raised questions about how Indian companies could continue operating, financing and supporting the port without facing sanctions exposure. India has to examine legal implications, negotiate diplomatic space, and protect its strategic investment. The issue is not merely technical; it tests India's ability to defend a critical project under external pressure.

Chabahar also faces competition from other corridor projects. China-backed Gwadar in Pakistan and CPEC form part of a different regional connectivity architecture. India's Chabahar strategy must therefore be implemented with speed and seriousness. In corridor politics, delay reduces credibility. Chabahar must not remain only a symbol in policy documents; it must become a regularly used commercial route. Its success depends upon *execution, cargo and trust*.

India should approach Chabahar through a layered strategy. First, it must preserve diplomatic understanding with the United States and other partners that Chabahar serves Afghanistan, Central Asia and regional connectivity. Second, it must reassure Iran that India remains committed despite sanctions pressure. Third, it must encourage Indian exporters, shipping companies and logistics firms to use the route. Fourth, it must connect Chabahar with INSTC, Central Asian markets and Afghanistan-related humanitarian flows. Fifth, it must create a legal and financial mechanism that allows legitimate transactions to continue.

Iran also has responsibilities. It must provide administrative clarity, port efficiency, predictable customs rules, security, competitive tariffs and smooth coordination with Indian operators. If Iran wants Chabahar to become a serious regional hub, it must make the port commercially attractive. Chabahar cannot survive only on strategic symbolism; it must deliver logistical performance.

In conclusion, Chabahar and sanctions together define the central tension of contemporary India–Iran relations. Chabahar represents strategic opportunity, while sanctions represent operational danger. In elevated diplomatic language, Chabahar is the *strategic gateway through which India seeks Eurasian access, but sanctions are the iron gatekeeper testing the durability of that ambition*.

20.3.2 West Asian Conflicts

West Asian conflicts constitute a major current challenge for India–Iran relations. The region is marked by overlapping crises: Iran–Israel confrontation, U.S.–Iran tensions, the Palestinian question, conflicts in Lebanon and Syria, instability in Iraq, Yemen’s conflict, Red Sea shipping insecurity, Gulf security anxieties and the wider contest between regional powers. India’s relationship with Iran cannot remain untouched by these conflicts because India has interests on all sides of West Asia.

India’s first concern is regional stability. West Asia is vital for India’s energy imports, diaspora welfare, trade, shipping and investment. Millions of Indians live and work in Gulf countries. Indian companies trade with Gulf states, Israel and Iran. Indian ships pass through regional waters. Therefore, any conflict that destabilizes West Asia immediately affects India. India cannot treat conflict in the region as distant or irrelevant. It is part of India’s *extended strategic neighbourhood*.

Iran–Israel confrontation is particularly difficult for India. India has strong defence, technology and agricultural cooperation with Israel. At the same time, Iran is important for Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia and civilizational diplomacy. If conflict between Iran and Israel intensifies, India faces pressure from both sides and from the wider international community. India’s policy must therefore be careful: it should oppose terrorism, civilian harm and escalation, while encouraging dialogue and restraint.

The United States factor makes the situation more complex. India has a major strategic partnership with the United States, while Iran views Washington as a hostile power. When U.S.–Iran tensions rise, India’s diplomatic space narrows. India must manage its U.S. partnership without abandoning its Iran interests. This is a central feature of *strategic autonomy under pressure*.

Gulf states also shape India’s calculations. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain are major Indian partners. Some Gulf states fear Iranian power, while others maintain pragmatic relations with Tehran. India must reassure Gulf partners that its Iran engagement is not directed against them. It must also reassure Iran that India’s Gulf partnerships are not designed to contain Iran. This requires *de-hyphenated diplomacy*.

West Asian conflicts also affect Chabahar and supply chains. Conflict can raise insurance premiums, disturb shipping schedules, reduce investor

confidence and make banks even more cautious. If ships avoid certain routes or cargo movement becomes risky, Chabahar's commercial viability can suffer. Therefore, conflict management is directly connected to infrastructure success.

India's diplomatic language in West Asian conflicts must remain measured. It should call for restraint, dialogue, protection of civilians, respect for international law, secure maritime routes and avoidance of wider war. India should avoid theatrical rhetoric. Its interest lies in stability, not ideological alignment. The Indian approach should be *principled, sober and interest-conscious*.

India can also use its credibility with multiple actors. It talks to Israel, Iran, Gulf countries, the United States, Russia and other stakeholders. Although India may not be the principal mediator, it can encourage moderation and maintain communication channels. In diplomacy, the ability to speak to all sides is itself a form of influence.

In conclusion, West Asian conflicts are a serious current strategic issue because they affect India's energy security, diaspora, Chabahar, trade and diplomatic balance. In refined language, West Asian conflicts are the *regional storms through which India must navigate without losing its strategic compass, commercial cargo or diplomatic credibility*.

20.3.3 Energy Security and Supply Chain Risks

Energy security and supply-chain risks are central to India's contemporary approach toward Iran and West Asia. India is one of the world's largest energy importers. Its economic growth, industrial expansion, transportation system, agriculture, household consumption and inflation management depend heavily on stable energy supplies. West Asia remains a critical source of oil and gas. Therefore, any instability involving Iran, the Strait of Hormuz or the Persian Gulf directly affects India's national economy.

Iran is important in this context for two reasons. First, Iran itself has large oil and gas reserves and has historically supplied crude oil to India. Second, Iran's geography gives it proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, through which a major portion of global oil and LNG trade passes. Even when India is not importing Iranian oil formally, instability around Iran can still affect India because the region is a key energy corridor. Thus, Iran matters as both *supplier and chokepoint neighbour*.

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. Oil and LNG from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE and Iran move through or near this route. A conflict that affects Hormuz can raise global oil prices, disrupt LNG flows, increase shipping insurance, delay cargo movement and create inflationary pressure in India. For a developing economy, energy-price shock can affect transport, food prices, industry, fiscal planning and household expenditure. Energy security is therefore not only a foreign-policy issue; it is a social-economic issue.

Supply-chain risks are broader than oil. West Asian instability can affect shipping lanes, container movement, fertilizers, petrochemicals, metals, food imports, remittances, aviation routes and insurance markets. If the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb become unsafe, shipping may be diverted around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing time and cost. If the Persian Gulf becomes risky, oil and LNG prices rise. If banks become cautious due to sanctions and conflict, trade finance suffers. This is a *multi-layered supply-chain vulnerability*.

India has tried to build resilience through diversification. It has expanded energy purchases from multiple suppliers, increased strategic petroleum reserves, deepened ties with Gulf producers, imported from Russia in recent years, encouraged renewables and pursued energy diplomacy. However, diversification cannot eliminate the importance of Hormuz and West Asia. India can reduce vulnerability, but it cannot escape geography. The Gulf remains central to India's energy map.

Iran's potential return as an energy supplier would benefit India's diversification, but sanctions remain a major barrier. If legal conditions change, Iranian crude could again become part of India's supply basket. However, any revival would require payment mechanisms, banking clarity, shipping insurance, refinery economics and diplomatic calculation. India cannot base its energy policy on uncertain supplies. It must remain ready but cautious. This is *contingent energy diplomacy*.

Supply-chain risks also make Chabahar more important. Chabahar provides India with a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia and can reduce overdependence on Pakistan-controlled overland access. If integrated with INSTC, it can help diversify trade routes. Corridor diversification is a supply-chain strategy. Just as India diversifies oil suppliers, it must diversify trade routes.

India's policy should therefore combine energy diplomacy, maritime security, strategic reserves, supplier diversification, renewable expansion, LNG planning, shipping-risk assessment and corridor development. It should also strengthen coordination between the Ministry of External Affairs, petroleum authorities, shipping agencies, ports, insurance companies, refiners and the Navy. Energy security requires *whole-of-government coordination*.

In conclusion, energy security and supply-chain risks make Iran and West Asia central to India's national interest. The region affects oil prices, LNG flows, shipping, inflation, fertilizers, trade and diaspora safety. In elevated strategic language, energy and supply chains are the *economic bloodstream of India's rise, and West Asian stability is one of the vital organs through which that bloodstream passes*.

20.4 India's Policy of Strategic Autonomy

India's policy of strategic autonomy is the intellectual and diplomatic foundation of its approach toward Iran. Strategic autonomy does not mean isolation, neutrality without judgment, or refusal to cooperate. It means the ability to make decisions according to India's own national interest, without automatic submission to any bloc, alliance or external pressure. In India–Iran relations, strategic autonomy allows India to maintain ties with Iran while simultaneously deepening relations with the United States, Israel and Gulf Arab states.

Strategic autonomy is rooted in India's historical experience. Colonial subordination taught India the importance of independent decision-making. The Non-Aligned Movement gave India a diplomatic tradition of avoiding bloc politics. The post-Cold War period transformed this tradition into *multi-alignment*, where India engages multiple major powers and regional actors simultaneously. In the twenty-first century, strategic autonomy is not passive non-alignment; it is active, flexible and interest-driven diplomacy.

Iran tests India's strategic autonomy more than many other relationships. India values Iran, but Iran is sanctioned by the United States. India needs Chabahar, but Chabahar is located in a sanctions-sensitive country. India wants energy diversification, but Iranian oil is restricted. India has historical ties with Iran, but also strong ties with Israel and Gulf Arab states. India supports peaceful settlement of disputes, but must also respond to terrorism,

nuclear concerns and regional conflicts. Therefore, Iran is a demanding theatre of *autonomy under constraint*.

India's strategic autonomy is not anti-Western. India cooperates deeply with the United States, Europe, Israel and Gulf states where interests converge. At the same time, India refuses to surrender independent relations with Iran, Russia or other partners when those relations serve national interest. Strategic autonomy is not a slogan of distance; it is a method of *selective partnership without strategic captivity*.

The success of strategic autonomy depends on capability. A weak state cannot easily practise autonomy. India's autonomy is strengthened by economic growth, defence capacity, diplomatic credibility, maritime reach, technological development and diversified partnerships. The stronger India becomes, the more effectively it can protect its Iran policy from external pressure. Autonomy requires power.

In conclusion, India's policy of strategic autonomy is essential for managing Iran relations in a divided world. It allows India to remain balanced, pragmatic and independent. In refined diplomatic language, strategic autonomy is the *sovereign discipline through which India converts complex external pressures into nationally calibrated choices*.

20.4.1 Multi-Alignment

Multi-alignment is the operational expression of India's strategic autonomy. It means engaging multiple powers and regional actors at the same time, based on issue-specific interests. India does not align permanently with one bloc against another. Instead, it builds partnerships with different countries in different sectors. In West Asia, this means cooperation with Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman and the United States simultaneously. This is the essence of *multi-vector diplomacy*.

In relation to Iran, multi-alignment allows India to protect Chabahar and Central Asian access without sacrificing relations with Israel or Gulf states. India can buy energy from Gulf suppliers, cooperate with Israel in defence technology, participate in I2U2 with the UAE, maintain strategic partnership with the United States, and still engage Iran on connectivity and civilization. This approach may appear difficult, but it reflects the complexity of India's interests.

Multi-alignment is necessary because West Asia itself is not divided into simple blocs. Gulf states engage with China, Russia, the United States, Israel and Iran in different ways. Iran has relations with China, Russia, India and some Gulf actors. Israel has deep ties with the United States and increasing ties with some Arab states. The regional order is fluid. India's policy must therefore be equally flexible. A rigid alliance approach would reduce India's options.

Multi-alignment also protects India from overdependence. If India relies too much on one country for energy, technology, defence or connectivity, it becomes vulnerable. By maintaining many partnerships, India creates strategic insurance. Iran is one such insurance in connectivity and potential energy. Gulf states are insurance in energy and diaspora. Israel is insurance in defence technology. The United States is insurance in global strategy. Russia is insurance in defence and Eurasian balance. This is *portfolio diplomacy*.

However, multi-alignment requires careful communication. Partners may suspect India of helping their rivals. Iran may worry about India–Israel ties. Israel may worry about India–Iran engagement. Gulf states may watch India's Iran policy. The United States may pressure India on sanctions. India must explain that its partnerships are not directed against third countries. This requires diplomatic finesse.

Multi-alignment also requires consistency. If India promises cooperation with Iran but fails to implement Chabahar, multi-alignment loses credibility. If India speaks of autonomy but cannot protect its interests under pressure, partners doubt its capacity. Therefore, multi-alignment must be supported by delivery. Autonomy without implementation becomes rhetoric.

India should use multi-alignment to encourage regional stability. Because India has relations with many actors, it can promote dialogue, restraint, maritime security and economic connectivity. It may not mediate every conflict, but it can maintain balanced communication. Multi-alignment gives India diplomatic reach.

In conclusion, multi-alignment is India's practical method for managing Iran relations within a complex West Asian order. It allows India to engage adversarial actors without becoming captive to their rivalries. In elevated

language, multi-alignment is the *diplomatic architecture through which India preserves many doors open in a region of many rivalries*.

20.4.2 Issue-Based Diplomacy

Issue-based diplomacy is another important feature of India's policy toward Iran. Instead of treating countries as permanent friends or permanent adversaries, India engages each partner according to specific issues. With Iran, India cooperates on Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, cultural ties, pharmaceuticals, food trade and regional consultations. It may differ from Iran on Israel, the nuclear issue, some regional conflicts or relations with China and Pakistan. This selective approach allows cooperation without complete alignment.

Issue-based diplomacy is realistic because international relations are rarely total. India and Iran cannot agree on everything. Their strategic environments differ. Iran's confrontation with the United States and Israel is not India's confrontation. India's Indo-Pacific concerns about China are not always Iran's concerns. India's Gulf partnerships are not Iran's priority. Therefore, India must identify areas of convergence and work on them while managing areas of divergence. This is *compartmentalized diplomacy*.

Chabahar is the clearest example. India works with Iran on Chabahar because it serves India's connectivity interests and Iran's development interests. This does not require India to support every Iranian regional position. Nor does it require Iran to support every Indian position. It is an issue-based convergence. The success of Chabahar depends on both sides protecting this compartment from unrelated disputes.

Afghanistan is another area of issue-based cooperation. India and Iran share concerns about terrorism, extremism and instability, though their policies toward the Taliban may differ. They can still consult on humanitarian assistance, regional stability, narcotics and connectivity. Issue-based diplomacy allows partial cooperation without demanding full policy identity.

Trade and pharmaceuticals provide another example. Even when oil trade is blocked, India can continue rice, tea, medicines, medical products, fruits and other permitted trade. Economic cooperation does not have to wait for a perfect strategic environment. Issue-based diplomacy looks for *workable spaces within difficult conditions*.

India's approach to West Asian conflicts also reflects issue-based diplomacy. India can condemn terrorism, call for civilian protection, support humanitarian access, maintain relations with Israel, preserve ties with Iran, and protect Gulf partnerships. These positions may appear complex, but they reflect different issues: terrorism, civilians, diplomacy, energy, diaspora and connectivity. India's policy is not emotional symmetry; it is national-interest differentiation.

Issue-based diplomacy also requires institutional mechanisms. Foreign Office Consultations, Joint Commission Meetings, security dialogues, port working groups, customs cooperation, business councils and cultural forums help separate issues and manage them. Without institutions, one crisis can contaminate the entire relationship. Institutions protect cooperation from political shocks.

There is also a moral dimension. Issue-based diplomacy should not mean opportunism without principle. India must remain consistent on peaceful settlement, sovereignty, territorial integrity, terrorism, non-proliferation, maritime security and citizen welfare. The issue-based approach must be guided by principles, not only convenience. It is *principled pragmatism*.

In conclusion, issue-based diplomacy allows India to cooperate with Iran where interests converge while managing differences elsewhere. It is essential for a complex relationship under sanctions and regional rivalry. In refined language, issue-based diplomacy is the *method of extracting practical cooperation from a field of partial convergence and unavoidable divergence*.

20.4.3 Protection of National Interest

Protection of national interest is the ultimate purpose of India's Iran policy. Cultural warmth, civilizational ties and diplomatic friendship are important, but foreign policy must finally protect the country's security, economy, citizens, connectivity, energy supply, strategic autonomy and global reputation. India's relationship with Iran must therefore be judged by how effectively it serves India's national interest while maintaining mutual respect.

India's first national interest is connectivity. Iran provides India with access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia without dependence on Pakistan. Chabahar is therefore a national-interest project. India must protect it through diplomacy, legal mechanisms, investment, logistics and regional outreach.

Losing Chabahar would weaken India's westward access and reduce its strategic options. Therefore, India must defend Chabahar with *quiet firmness*.

India's second national interest is energy security. Even when Iranian oil is restricted, Iran and the Persian Gulf remain central to India's energy environment. India must diversify suppliers, protect maritime routes, monitor Hormuz, expand strategic reserves, negotiate with Gulf producers, and remain ready to re-engage Iran if conditions permit. Energy security requires flexibility, not ideological rigidity.

India's third national interest is diaspora safety. Millions of Indians live in West Asia. Any conflict involving Iran, Israel, Gulf states or the United States can affect Indian citizens. India must maintain relations with all sides to ensure evacuation, consular protection and labour welfare if crises arise. Diplomatic balance is therefore a citizen-protection tool.

India's fourth national interest is economic resilience. Sanctions, oil-price shocks, shipping disruptions and supply-chain uncertainty affect inflation, imports, exports and industrial planning. India must build resilient payment systems, diversify trade routes, support exporters and reduce vulnerability to maritime chokepoints. Economic security is now part of foreign policy.

India's fifth national interest is countering terrorism and extremism. India and Iran both have concerns about terrorism, radicalization, narcotics and instability in Afghanistan. India should maintain security dialogue with Iran, especially on Afghanistan and regional threats, while avoiding entanglement in Iran's broader regional conflicts. Security cooperation must be focused and prudent.

India's sixth national interest is managing China's rise. China's growing role in Iran, Pakistan and West Asian diplomacy affects India's strategic space. India should not allow Iran to become exclusively dependent on China. Sustained India–Iran engagement gives Tehran an alternative Asian partner and gives India strategic presence. This is *balancing through engagement*.

India's seventh national interest is maintaining global credibility. India aspires to be a leading power, not merely a regional actor. It must show that it can handle difficult relationships responsibly. Its Iran policy must therefore respect international law, avoid reckless sanctions violations, support peaceful settlement, oppose nuclear proliferation, and protect legitimate

connectivity interests. Strategic autonomy must be responsible, not defiant for its own sake.

Protection of national interest also requires realism. India cannot solve Iran's sanctions problem alone. It cannot force the United States to change policy. It cannot eliminate Iran–Israel conflict. It cannot guarantee Afghan stability. But India can preserve options, build resilience, negotiate space and avoid strategic overdependence. National interest lies in *flexibility, preparation and calibrated engagement*.

In conclusion, India's policy toward Iran must be guided by national interest above sentiment or pressure. India should maintain Iran ties because they serve connectivity, energy, security and civilizational interests. But India should do so with legal caution, diplomatic balance and strategic clarity. In elevated language, protection of national interest is the *sovereign compass by which India must navigate the sanctions-laden, conflict-ridden and corridor-rich landscape of Iran policy*.

Concluding Observation

Current India–Iran relations are shaped by Chabahar, sanctions, West Asian conflicts, energy security, supply-chain risks and India's strategic autonomy. Chabahar remains the central project, but sanctions create uncertainty. West Asian conflicts test India's balancing capacity. Hormuz and regional maritime routes expose India to energy and supply-chain vulnerability. These issues make Iran policy one of the most demanding areas of Indian diplomacy.

India's response must be rooted in *multi-alignment, issue-based diplomacy and protection of national interest*. India should engage Iran without alienating other partners, preserve Chabahar without reckless exposure, support regional stability without joining rival blocs, and pursue energy security without dependence on any single source. In the broader framework of contemporary foreign policy, India–Iran relations represent the *living test of India's ability to practise strategic autonomy in a world of sanctions, wars, corridors and competing partnerships*.

Chapter 21:

Future Prospects of India–Iran Geopolitics

The future prospects of India–Iran geopolitics will be shaped by the interaction of *geography, connectivity, sanctions, energy security, maritime strategy, Central Asian access, Afghanistan's uncertainty, China's expanding role*, and India's larger doctrine of *strategic autonomy*. India and Iran are not ordinary neighbouring partners separated only by distance; they are two civilizational states connected through history and compelled by geography to engage each other in the twenty-first century. Their future will depend upon whether they can convert historical goodwill and strategic necessity into operational corridors, trade routes, institutional trust and economic resilience.

The central question for the future is not whether India and Iran possess strategic relevance for each other. That relevance is already clear. The true question is whether they can overcome the *implementation deficit* that has repeatedly weakened their cooperation. Chabahar Port, the International North–South Transport Corridor, energy possibilities, pharmaceutical trade, agricultural exchange, cultural diplomacy and regional consultation all contain potential. Yet potential becomes power only when ports function, cargo moves, banks cooperate, railways connect, exporters receive payment, and governments maintain political resolve. Thus, the future of India–Iran geopolitics will be decided not by rhetoric alone but by *geo-economic execution*.

In the language of classical geopolitics, Iran remains a state of exceptional strategic location. Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History* explains the significance of continental access; Nicholas Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace* highlights the strategic importance of the rimland; Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* shows why maritime routes, ports and sea lanes determine commercial and political power. Iran sits at the intersection of these three geopolitical logics. It connects the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Caspian region, Central Asia,

Afghanistan, West Asia and Eurasia. For India, whose direct land access to Central Asia is blocked by Pakistan, Iran offers a rare *geostrategic aperture*.

The future will also be shaped by the emerging multipolar order. Iran is moving toward Asian partnerships through China, Russia, India, SCO and BRICS. India is following *multi-alignment*, engaging the United States, Russia, Europe, Israel, Gulf states, Iran, Central Asia and Indo-Pacific partners simultaneously. This creates both opportunity and complexity. India can engage Iran as part of a wider Eurasian and West Asian strategy, but it must manage U.S. sanctions, Iran–Israel tensions, Gulf sensitivities and China’s growing influence. The future of India–Iran geopolitics will therefore require *strategic patience*, *diplomatic dexterity* and *institutional seriousness*.

Among all future prospects, Chabahar Port is the most important. It is not only a port; it is a geopolitical idea, an economic instrument, a diplomatic commitment and a strategic pathway. It carries India’s hope of reaching Afghanistan and Central Asia without Pakistan. It carries Iran’s hope of developing its south-eastern region and strengthening its role as a transit state. It offers Afghanistan and Central Asian republics an alternative outlet to the sea. It also gives India a practical instrument to participate in Eurasian connectivity. Therefore, the future of India–Iran geopolitics begins with the future of Chabahar.

21.1 Future of Chabahar Port

The future of Chabahar Port is central to the future of India–Iran relations. No other single project so clearly combines India’s strategic, economic, diplomatic and connectivity interests with Iran’s geographic advantage. Chabahar is located on Iran’s south-eastern coast, near the Gulf of Oman, and provides access to the Arabian Sea without passing through the narrow interior of the Persian Gulf. This location gives it high maritime value. For India, it is a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia; for Iran, it is a development engine for Sistan and Baluchestan; for Afghanistan, it is an alternative to Pakistan-controlled routes; for Central Asia, it is a potential southern outlet to the Indian Ocean.

The future of Chabahar depends on whether it can move from *strategic symbolism* to *commercial regularity*. A port becomes important not because it is mentioned in joint statements, but because cargo moves through it regularly, shipping lines trust it, exporters use it, customs systems function

efficiently, banks process payments, insurers cover shipments, and surrounding infrastructure supports inland movement. Chabahar's future will therefore depend on a complete *port ecosystem*, not only on the port terminal.

The 2024 long-term contract gave Chabahar a stronger institutional base. It created a longer horizon for India's operational role and signalled that both India and Iran wanted to treat the port as a durable project, not a temporary arrangement. However, the contract must now be supported by actual equipment, cargo promotion, shipping frequency, hinterland connectivity, rail-road integration and business confidence. Without these, even a long-term agreement may remain underutilized. The future of Chabahar will be decided by *implementation density*.

Sanctions remain the greatest danger. U.S. sanctions can discourage banks, shipping companies, investors, insurers and private firms. Even when governments support Chabahar, private actors may hesitate because they fear penalties or future uncertainty. Therefore, India must continue diplomatic engagement to protect Chabahar's operational space. It must also design legally safe and transparent mechanisms for permitted trade. Chabahar cannot flourish if every transaction becomes a compliance nightmare. The port requires *sanctions-resilient financial architecture*.

Afghanistan's stability will also influence Chabahar's future. If Afghanistan's trade with India, Iran and Central Asia grows, Chabahar can become more useful. If instability, border closures, terrorism or weak governance disrupt Afghan transit, the port's commercial potential may remain limited. India and Iran must therefore link Chabahar with humanitarian assistance, dry ports, Afghan trader facilitation, customs simplification and regional logistics. Chabahar's future is tied to Afghanistan's ability to become a functioning transit participant.

Central Asian participation is equally essential. Chabahar should not be seen only as an India–Iran bilateral project. Its true future lies in becoming a multilateral corridor involving Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and possibly Russia through INSTC linkages. If Central Asian states use Chabahar for trade with India and the wider Indian Ocean, the port will gain strategic and commercial sustainability. Thus, Chabahar's future depends on transforming it into a *regional connectivity commons*.

Iran's role will be decisive. Iran must provide security, administrative efficiency, competitive tariffs, customs transparency, road and rail connectivity, and local development around the port. Chabahar is located in a sensitive region; therefore, development and security must go together. If local communities benefit from employment, trade, logistics and infrastructure, the port's stability will improve. Iran must make Chabahar not only a national project but a regional-development success.

India's role will also be decisive. India must increase cargo usage, encourage exporters, improve shipping links from Indian ports, support warehousing and logistics, connect Chabahar with INSTC, and maintain political commitment despite external pressure. India must avoid the old weakness of grand vision and slow execution. Chabahar should be treated as a *national strategic project* requiring inter-ministerial coordination among external affairs, ports, shipping, commerce, finance, petroleum, railways, customs, banks and private industry.

In conclusion, the future of Chabahar Port is promising but not guaranteed. It has strategic geography, political support and regional relevance, but it faces sanctions, infrastructure gaps, limited cargo, Afghanistan uncertainty and business hesitation. In refined geopolitical language, Chabahar is a *future-bearing maritime hinge whose success will depend upon India and Iran's ability to convert strategic imagination into disciplined corridor management*.

21.1.1 Regional Trade Hub

Chabahar has the potential to become a regional trade hub if India, Iran and regional partners build a full logistics ecosystem around it. A trade hub is not merely a port where ships dock; it is a commercial node where goods are collected, stored, processed, cleared, financed, transported and redistributed. Chabahar can serve as such a hub for India, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and possibly Russia-linked trade through INSTC. Its future as a regional trade hub will depend upon *cargo aggregation, customs efficiency, banking support, shipping regularity and hinterland connectivity*.

The first reason Chabahar can become a regional trade hub is its location. It lies on the Gulf of Oman and gives access to the Arabian Sea. Unlike ports located deeper inside the Persian Gulf, Chabahar has direct proximity to the wider Indian Ocean maritime system. For Indian exporters, this makes it

geographically attractive. Goods from Indian ports such as Mumbai, Nhava Sheva, Kandla, Mundra and other western ports can move to Chabahar and then onward by road and rail. This creates a maritime-commercial bridge between India and Iran's eastern corridor.

The second reason is Afghanistan. Afghanistan is landlocked and has historically depended heavily on Pakistan's ports and transit routes. Political tensions and border closures have repeatedly shown the vulnerability of that dependence. Chabahar gives Afghanistan an alternative maritime outlet. Afghan exports such as dry fruits, saffron, carpets, agricultural products and minerals can move through Chabahar, while imports such as food, medicines, fuel, machinery and industrial goods can enter Afghanistan through Iran. This makes Chabahar a *trade-liberating corridor* for Afghanistan.

The third reason is Central Asia. Central Asian republics are also landlocked and constantly seek diversified access to seaports. Chabahar can offer them a southern route to the Indian Ocean. If properly connected through Iranian road and rail networks, and if customs procedures are efficient, goods from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan can move toward Chabahar. Indian goods can move in the opposite direction. This would give Chabahar a wider regional trade role beyond bilateral India–Iran trade.

The fourth reason is India's growing economy. India's demand for minerals, fertilizers, energy inputs, dry fruits, metals, agricultural products and Central Asian resources can support corridor traffic. Indian exports of pharmaceuticals, rice, tea, machinery, textiles, processed food, engineering goods and consumer items can move toward Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Indian market is large enough to give Chabahar long-term commercial relevance if logistics are competitive.

However, the regional trade-hub dream faces challenges. A port can become a hub only when it is cost-effective. Traders compare routes by time, cost, reliability, security, customs burden and payment ease. If Chabahar is slower, more expensive or more uncertain than alternatives, traders will avoid it. Therefore, India and Iran must focus on practical competitiveness. The port must provide *predictable cargo movement*.

Customs cooperation will be essential. Delays at ports and borders can destroy the advantage of a corridor. Digital documentation, single-window

clearance, pre-arrival processing, standardized certificates, transparent tariffs and trained customs officials can reduce friction. India and Iran should also coordinate with Afghanistan and Central Asian states to reduce duplication of checks. A regional trade hub requires *soft infrastructure* as much as cranes and warehouses.

Warehousing and logistics services are also necessary. Chabahar should develop container yards, cold storage, packaging units, bonded warehouses, cargo consolidation facilities, trucking services, freight-forwarding offices, insurance services and banking counters. Without such services, it will remain a transit point rather than a true hub. A hub must add value; it must not merely pass cargo through.

Private-sector participation is crucial. Governments can create frameworks, but merchants generate cargo. Indian exporters, Iranian traders, Afghan merchants and Central Asian logistics companies must be encouraged to use Chabahar. Trade fairs, route demonstrations, pilot shipments, tariff incentives and cargo guarantees can help. The port must be marketed, not only announced. Chabahar needs *commercial evangelism*.

The regional trade-hub future also requires political stability. If Iran–Israel conflict escalates, sanctions tighten, Afghanistan becomes unstable, or Pakistan-linked disruptions spill over, traders may hesitate. Therefore, Chabahar’s future as a trade hub depends upon regional peace and diplomatic management. Trade corridors are fragile in war zones.

In conclusion, Chabahar can become a regional trade hub if it gains cargo, connectivity, financial confidence and logistical efficiency. Its natural geography is promising, but geography alone is not destiny. In elevated economic language, Chabahar’s future as a trade hub will depend upon whether India and Iran can transform a *strategic port into a living commercial organism serving Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean economy*.

21.1.2 Link With Central Asia

Chabahar’s link with Central Asia is one of its most important future prospects. India has long sought deeper relations with Central Asian republics, but Pakistan’s refusal to provide overland access has restricted India’s physical connectivity. Iran provides India with a possible solution. Through Chabahar, Indian goods can enter Iran and then move toward Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and beyond.

This makes Chabahar the southern gateway of India's *Central Asian outreach*.

Central Asia is important for India because of energy, minerals, security, history and geopolitics. Kazakhstan has uranium and energy resources; Turkmenistan has gas; Uzbekistan is a major regional state with trade and industrial potential; Tajikistan has security relevance near Afghanistan; Kyrgyzstan is part of the wider Eurasian network. India's relations with these states require better connectivity. Diplomatic relations without transport routes remain limited. Chabahar can help convert India's Central Asian diplomacy into commercial reality.

The link between Chabahar and Central Asia must be understood within the wider framework of INSTC. The International North–South Transport Corridor seeks to connect India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and Europe through maritime, rail and road networks. Chabahar can become an important southern node in this system if linked with Iranian inland transport. This would give India access not only to Central Asia but also to the Caspian and Russia-connected markets. Thus, Chabahar is part of a larger *Eurasian corridor imagination*.

Uzbekistan has shown interest in using routes through Iran and Chabahar because it seeks access to warm-water ports. Turkmenistan's location makes it naturally relevant to any Iran–Central Asia transport linkage. Kazakhstan can benefit from diversified southern access. Tajikistan, though geographically more difficult, can connect through Afghanistan and regional networks if stability improves. Therefore, the Central Asian link is not one corridor but a family of possible routes. Chabahar's future depends upon developing this *corridor plurality*.

Afghanistan remains the difficult middle space. Some India–Central Asia routes through Chabahar may move through Afghanistan; others may move through Iran and Turkmenistan. The Afghan route has strategic value but is vulnerable to instability. The Iran–Turkmenistan route may offer more predictability in some cases. India and Iran should therefore avoid dependence on one route. They should develop multiple Central Asian pathways from Chabahar.

Rail connectivity will be crucial. Road transport can begin trade, but railways reduce cost and increase volume. The Chabahar–Zahedan link, connections

to Iran's national rail network, routes toward Mashhad, Sarakhs, Turkmenistan and the Caspian corridor are all important. Without rail integration, Chabahar's Central Asian role will remain limited. A port needs inland railways to become a continental gateway. Railways are the *iron nerves of corridor geopolitics*.

Central Asian states will use Chabahar only if the route is reliable and economically competitive. They will compare it with routes through China, Russia, Pakistan, the Caspian and Turkey. India and Iran must therefore offer efficiency, security and transparent tariffs. Political goodwill alone will not attract cargo. Central Asian trade policy is pragmatic. Chabahar must compete as a route, not merely appeal as a strategic idea.

Chabahar can also support India's engagement in the India–Central Asia Dialogue framework. Connectivity has been a recurring concern in India–Central Asia relations. If Chabahar and INSTC become operationally stronger, India can expand trade in pharmaceuticals, textiles, machinery, tea, food products, IT services and education. In return, India can access minerals, fertilizers, agricultural products and energy-related goods. This would give substance to India's *extended neighbourhood policy*.

The Central Asian link also has strategic value in relation to China. China's Belt and Road Initiative has expanded Chinese influence across Central Asia. India does not have comparable land connectivity. Chabahar offers India a way to remain present in Eurasian connectivity without relying on China-controlled or Pakistan-controlled routes. It is therefore part of India's *connectivity-balancing strategy*.

In conclusion, Chabahar's link with Central Asia is one of the most promising future prospects in India–Iran geopolitics. It can overcome Pakistan's obstruction, support INSTC, diversify Central Asian access to the sea and strengthen India's Eurasian role. In refined geopolitical language, Chabahar is the *southern maritime key with which India seeks to unlock the landlocked chambers of Central Asia*.

21.1.3 Strategic Value for India

The strategic value of Chabahar for India is immense. It provides India with access, autonomy, regional influence, connectivity diversification and geopolitical leverage. It is not merely a commercial project; it is an instrument of national strategy. Its value lies in the fact that it helps India overcome the

geographical limitation imposed by Pakistan's denial of transit, while simultaneously strengthening India's presence in Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the wider Eurasian space.

The first strategic value is bypassing Pakistan. India's direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia is blocked by Pakistan. This has historically limited India's ability to trade with these regions. Chabahar gives India an alternative route through the sea and Iran. This reduces India's dependence on Pakistan's goodwill and gives India *connectivity autonomy*. In strategic terms, this is one of Chabahar's greatest advantages.

The second strategic value is Afghanistan. India has invested heavily in Afghanistan's development and has long wanted to support Afghan people through infrastructure, food, medicine, education and humanitarian assistance. Chabahar allows India to send goods to Afghanistan without relying on Pakistan. It therefore strengthens India's Afghan policy and provides a practical route for humanitarian engagement. In a region where geography is power, Chabahar gives India *humanitarian reach with strategic significance*.

The third value is Central Asian access. India wants deeper ties with Central Asian republics for energy, minerals, security and trade. Chabahar offers a route toward these states through Iran and regional corridors. This helps India translate diplomatic outreach into physical connectivity. Without such access, India's Central Asian policy remains limited. Chabahar gives India a *westward continental opening*.

The fourth value is balancing China–Pakistan connectivity. Gwadar Port and CPEC create a China–Pakistan corridor that concerns India strategically. Chabahar, though different in purpose and structure, gives India a presence near the same broader maritime region. It allows India to participate in regional corridor politics and prevents complete China–Pakistan dominance of western connectivity narratives. Chabahar is therefore an instrument of *countervailing geoeconomic presence*.

The fifth value is strengthening India–Iran relations. A successful Chabahar project creates durable interdependence between India and Iran. It gives the relationship a tangible foundation beyond civilizational language. Ports create recurring cooperation among ministries, companies, customs officials, shipping lines and traders. This practical interdependence can make the

relationship more resilient against political shocks. Chabahar is a *trust-building infrastructure*.

The sixth value is maritime strategy. India is a major Indian Ocean power. Chabahar connects India's maritime reach with continental objectives. It extends India's strategic imagination from the Arabian Sea into Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia. This is a rare fusion of sea power and land access. In Mahanian terms, Chabahar helps India convert maritime capability into geopolitical influence. It is a *sea-to-land strategic converter*.

The seventh value is supply-chain diversification. A rising India needs multiple routes for trade, energy, minerals and strategic goods. Overdependence on any single corridor is risky. Chabahar, when connected with INSTC and Central Asian routes, can diversify India's trade pathways. In a world of wars, sanctions, chokepoints and supply-chain disruptions, such diversification is a strategic necessity.

The eighth value is diplomatic autonomy. If India can sustain Chabahar despite sanctions and regional difficulties, it demonstrates that India can protect its national interests through negotiation and persistence. Chabahar is a test of India's *strategic autonomy*. It shows whether India can maintain useful relations with Iran while also managing its partnerships with the United States, Israel and Gulf states.

The ninth value is economic opportunity. Chabahar can support Indian exporters, logistics companies, pharmaceutical firms, food suppliers, infrastructure companies and service providers. It can open markets in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It can also support Indian participation in regional warehousing, cold chains, dry ports and transport services. Strategic projects must eventually generate economic benefits; otherwise, they remain symbolic.

The tenth value is regional credibility. India aspires to be a leading power. Leading powers build routes, provide alternatives and support regional public goods. Chabahar allows India to contribute to connectivity for Afghanistan and Central Asia. It strengthens India's image as a country that can deliver development-oriented strategic infrastructure. This is important for India's broader global role.

However, the strategic value of Chabahar will remain incomplete unless India improves implementation. A project of such importance cannot be handled

casually. It requires long-term financing, cargo planning, political attention, legal protection, business participation and regional marketing. India must ensure that Chabahar does not become an example of *strategic promise weakened by administrative delay*. The port's value lies in use, not only possession.

In conclusion, Chabahar's strategic value for India is extraordinary. It gives India access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia; reduces dependence on Pakistan; balances China–Pakistan corridor influence; strengthens India–Iran ties; supports maritime strategy; and enhances strategic autonomy. In elevated geopolitical language, Chabahar is the *western maritime sentinel of India's Eurasian ambition, a port through which India seeks access, autonomy and influence beyond the constraints of South Asian geography*.

Concluding Observation

The future of Chabahar Port will be one of the decisive factors in the future of India–Iran geopolitics. If Chabahar becomes a functioning regional trade hub, it can transform India–Iran relations and strengthen India's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. If it remains slow, underused and sanctions-bound, it will continue to symbolize unrealized potential. The difference between these two futures will depend on implementation.

India and Iran must therefore treat Chabahar as a long-term strategic project requiring continuity, patience and precision. It must be linked with Central Asia, INSTC, Afghanistan, private trade, logistics infrastructure, customs reform and banking solutions. In the larger vision of India–Iran relations, Chabahar is not merely a port on the Gulf of Oman; it is the *geo-economic fulcrum through which India and Iran can reshape the geography of Asian connectivity*.

21.2 Future of Energy Cooperation

The future of India–Iran energy cooperation will remain one of the most significant but most uncertain dimensions of bilateral relations. Energy once formed the strongest material foundation of India–Iran relations, especially when Iranian crude oil was a major component of India's import basket. However, sanctions, payment restrictions, banking hesitation, shipping-insurance complications and geopolitical pressure reduced this cooperation dramatically. The future, therefore, will depend upon whether India and Iran

can create a new energy framework that is *legally sustainable, commercially viable, strategically prudent* and *sanctions-resilient*.

Energy cooperation between India and Iran has a natural logic. India is a large and growing energy consumer. Iran possesses abundant oil and gas reserves, petrochemical capacity and geographic proximity to Indian ports. In ordinary economic conditions, Iran would be a valuable supplier for India because it can contribute to supplier diversification, freight efficiency and long-term energy security. Yet energy does not operate in an ordinary market environment; it operates within the geopolitics of sanctions, nuclear negotiations, U.S.–Iran relations, Gulf security and the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, India–Iran energy cooperation is a classic case of *economic complementarity restrained by geopolitical interdiction*.

The future of energy cooperation should not be imagined only through crude oil. It must include oil trade, LPG, natural gas, LNG possibilities, petrochemicals, fertilizers, refinery cooperation, energy logistics, strategic reserves, renewable energy, energy-efficiency dialogue and possible cooperation within multilateral energy platforms. If sanctions conditions remain uncertain, India and Iran should begin with sectors that are commercially possible and legally less exposed. If sanctions ease, larger oil and gas cooperation can gradually revive. This requires *phased energy diplomacy*.

Energy cooperation also has a strategic dimension beyond bilateral trade. Stability in Iran and the Persian Gulf affects India's energy supply even when India is not importing Iranian crude. The Strait of Hormuz remains one of the world's most critical energy chokepoints. Conflict around Iran can raise oil prices, disrupt LNG flows, increase insurance premiums and threaten Indian shipping. Therefore, India's energy cooperation with Iran is linked with India's broader interest in *maritime stability, supply-chain resilience* and *West Asian de-escalation*.

Books such as Daniel Yergin's *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World* explain that energy is not merely a commodity but a central determinant of power, vulnerability and statecraft. Robert D. Kaplan's *Monsoon* and Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* also help us understand why energy and maritime routes are inseparable for India. Iran's energy resources and maritime

geography together make it a state of high strategic relevance for India's long-term energy thinking.

In conclusion, the future of energy cooperation between India and Iran is promising but conditional. It can revive if sanctions ease, payment channels become reliable, shipping confidence improves and both sides design practical mechanisms. In refined geopolitical language, India–Iran energy cooperation is a *dormant strategic reservoir whose revival depends upon the removal of sanctions sediment, financial blockage and maritime insecurity*.

21.2.1 Oil Trade Revival

The revival of oil trade is one of the most important future possibilities in India–Iran relations. Iranian crude oil once formed a major part of India's energy imports and gave bilateral trade its strongest economic foundation. Oil created large trade volume, regular commercial interaction, refinery familiarity and strategic interdependence. Its decline after sanctions weakened the economic depth of the relationship. Therefore, any revival of oil trade would have both economic and diplomatic significance.

Oil trade revival is attractive for India because India needs diversified crude sources. A diversified energy basket protects India from price shocks, supplier pressure and regional disruptions. Iranian crude can be commercially useful because of geographic proximity, freight advantage and refinery familiarity. Indian refiners historically processed Iranian grades and understood their quality, yield and blending requirements. If legal conditions permit, Iranian crude could again provide India with *supplier diversification*.

For Iran, India is a valuable oil market. India is one of the world's largest energy consumers, and its demand is expected to remain significant for decades even as renewables expand. Iran would benefit from a reliable major Asian buyer that is not China. At present, sanctions have pushed Iran closer to Chinese buyers and shadow-market mechanisms. A revival of oil trade with India would help Iran diversify its export destinations and reduce excessive dependence on limited channels. This would serve Iran's interest in *market diversification*.

However, revival of oil trade faces serious obstacles. The first obstacle is sanctions. Unless there is a clear legal window, Indian refiners and banks will not risk large-scale purchases. The second obstacle is payment. Oil trade requires large financial flows, and ordinary dollar payments may be

impossible or risky. The third obstacle is shipping and insurance. Tankers, insurers and port operators must be confident that transactions will not expose them to penalties. The fourth obstacle is refinery planning. Indian refiners sign supply contracts and adjust crude baskets in advance; sudden revival may not be easy.

The payment question is especially important. Earlier rupee-based arrangements helped sustain some trade, but oil revival would require a much more robust mechanism. Possible options include rupee settlement, escrow accounts, third-currency arrangements, barter-like systems, special-purpose channels and government-supported payment windows. However, any mechanism must be legally transparent and compliant. India cannot allow energy trade to damage its financial credibility. The correct approach is *lawful financial innovation*.

Oil trade revival also depends on global energy politics. If U.S.–Iran negotiations improve, sanctions may ease temporarily or structurally. If tensions rise, sanctions may intensify again. India cannot build energy security on unpredictable political openings alone. It must treat Iranian oil as an optional but valuable component of its diversified basket, not as a single-point dependency. The future policy should be *ready-to-engage but risk-aware*.

Revival of oil trade could also strengthen Chabahar and wider India–Iran relations indirectly. Energy trade generates financial flows, commercial confidence and diplomatic momentum. If Iran earns revenue from India, it may have greater interest in buying Indian goods and supporting Indian projects. Energy and non-energy trade can reinforce each other. Therefore, oil revival is not only an energy issue; it is a relationship multiplier.

Yet India must remain careful not to over-politicize oil imports. Energy decisions must be based on price, quality, legality, payment feasibility, supply reliability and strategic diversification. Iranian crude should be considered when it strengthens India's energy security without creating avoidable diplomatic exposure. This is *pragmatic energy statecraft*.

In conclusion, oil trade revival is desirable but conditional. It can restore economic depth to India–Iran relations, diversify India's crude basket and reduce Iran's dependence on limited buyers. But it requires sanctions clarity, payment channels, shipping confidence and refinery readiness. In elevated

economic language, oil trade revival is the *possible re-opening of the hydrocarbon artery that once gave India–Iran relations their strongest commercial pulse*.

21.2.2 Gas Cooperation

Gas cooperation represents a long-term but difficult area of India–Iran relations. Iran possesses one of the world’s largest natural gas reserves, while India has rising demand for cleaner fuels, city gas, fertilizers, petrochemicals, power and industrial use. In principle, gas cooperation between India and Iran appears highly logical. In practice, however, geography, sanctions, infrastructure, pricing, Pakistan transit, LNG limitations and political risk have repeatedly obstructed it. Gas cooperation is therefore a field of *high strategic potential and high operational difficulty*.

The most famous idea in this field was the Iran–Pakistan–India gas pipeline. The proposed pipeline aimed to carry Iranian gas to Pakistan and India. Economically, it appeared attractive because it could connect Iran’s gas surplus with South Asian demand. Strategically, however, it faced severe obstacles. India had concerns about security of supply through Pakistani territory, pricing, transit fees, pipeline safety and geopolitical vulnerability. U.S. opposition and sanctions further complicated the project. The pipeline remained unrealized, showing that energy geography can be defeated by political geography.

The pipeline experience remains important for future thinking. India cannot depend on Pakistan-controlled routes for critical energy supplies. A pipeline passing through Pakistan would expose India to strategic pressure and supply disruption. Therefore, any future India–Iran gas cooperation must reduce transit vulnerability. This may include LNG, offshore concepts, petrochemical cooperation, fertilizer projects in Iran, or other arrangements that do not depend on politically insecure land routes. India needs *energy access without strategic hostage-taking*.

LNG cooperation is another possible but complex route. Iran has large gas reserves but has faced difficulty developing LNG export infrastructure due to sanctions, technology denial and investment constraints. LNG projects require advanced liquefaction technology, financing, long-term contracts, shipping and stable legal conditions. Without sanctions relief and external

investment, Iranian LNG exports to India will remain difficult. Yet in the long term, if Iran develops LNG capacity, India could be a major market.

Gas cooperation may also be pursued through fertilizers and petrochemicals. Instead of transporting raw gas to India, Iran could use its gas domestically to produce urea, ammonia, methanol and petrochemical products for export to India. This model may be more feasible than a pipeline because it converts gas into tradable industrial goods. India's agricultural sector needs fertilizers, and Iran's gas resources could support such production. This is *gas-to-goods cooperation*.

Another possibility is Indian investment in gas-based industries in Iran, provided sanctions conditions allow. Indian companies could explore participation in fertilizer plants, petrochemical complexes, methanol facilities or industrial zones linked with Iranian gas. Such projects would connect India's demand with Iran's resource advantage. However, private companies will not invest without legal safety, payment clarity and long-term political assurance.

Gas cooperation also has climate relevance. Natural gas is often viewed as a transition fuel compared with coal and oil, though it remains a fossil fuel. India's energy transition requires a balance between affordability, reliability and sustainability. Iranian gas, if accessible, could support India's cleaner-fuel transition in industry and city-gas networks. But this would require long-term planning and secure supply chains.

Iran's gas cooperation with India must also be compared with India's other suppliers. Qatar, the United States, Australia, Russia and other LNG suppliers are already part of India's gas import landscape. Iran must offer competitive terms, reliability and legal clarity to become relevant. India will not choose Iranian gas only because of friendship; it will choose it if it strengthens energy security. Energy policy is ultimately *commercially disciplined strategic policy*.

In conclusion, gas cooperation has enormous long-term promise but faces serious constraints. Pipelines are politically difficult; LNG requires infrastructure and sanctions relief; petrochemicals and fertilizers may offer more realistic pathways. In refined language, India-Iran gas cooperation is a *subterranean promise of energy partnership awaiting a politically secure route, a lawful financial channel and an industrially viable form*.

21.2.3 Energy Diversification

Energy diversification is the central principle that should guide India's future energy cooperation with Iran. India cannot depend excessively on any single supplier, route, fuel, region or political arrangement. Energy security in the twenty-first century requires diversity of crude suppliers, gas sources, maritime routes, strategic reserves, renewable energy, nuclear energy, domestic production, refining flexibility and diplomatic partnerships. Iran can play a role in this diversification, but it cannot be the whole solution. It must be one part of a larger *energy resilience architecture*.

India's energy diversification is necessary because of geopolitical risk. Wars, sanctions, maritime chokepoints, price shocks, producer decisions, OPEC policies, Russia-related sanctions, Red Sea disruptions, Hormuz tensions and financial restrictions can all affect supply. The more diversified India's energy basket, the less vulnerable it becomes. Iran's potential inclusion adds another option, especially because it is geographically closer than many alternative suppliers and has large reserves.

Iran contributes to diversification in several possible ways. First, it can supply crude oil if sanctions conditions permit. Second, it can supply LPG or petroleum products in certain circumstances. Third, it can provide petrochemicals and fertilizer inputs. Fourth, it can support gas-based industrial cooperation. Fifth, its location near major energy routes gives India a diplomatic reason to engage Iran for maritime stability. Thus, Iran's role in diversification is not only resource-based but also geography-based.

Energy diversification also means route diversification. Chabahar and INSTC can help diversify trade routes, though not oil routes directly in all cases. Maritime energy flows through Hormuz remain central, but India can reduce broader supply-chain vulnerability by strengthening alternative routes for non-energy goods. Energy and trade resilience must be viewed together. A state that diversifies routes gains strategic flexibility.

India must also diversify within the energy transition. Renewable energy, green hydrogen, solar power, wind energy, battery storage, nuclear energy and energy efficiency reduce long-term vulnerability to imported fossil fuels. India and Iran can explore cooperation in renewable energy, especially solar, because both countries have climatic conditions suitable for solar expansion.

Such cooperation would be less politically sensitive than oil and gas, though technology and finance still matter.

Strategic petroleum reserves are another component. India should continue strengthening reserves to cushion shocks. In times of Gulf crisis, stored crude can reduce panic and provide bargaining space. Energy diplomacy must be supported by physical preparedness. Strategic autonomy requires not only diplomatic language but material buffers. This is *stockpile-backed sovereignty*.

Refinery flexibility is also important. Indian refiners should maintain the ability to process different crude grades from different regions. If Iranian crude becomes available, refineries should be technically prepared. If it becomes unavailable, they should switch smoothly. Flexibility in refining is a hidden but important instrument of energy security.

Energy diversification also includes financial diversification. Payment systems should not depend only on dollar channels vulnerable to sanctions. Local-currency mechanisms, rupee trade settlement, escrow arrangements and legally compliant alternative settlement systems may become increasingly important. However, such mechanisms must be transparent and credible. Financial diversification without legality can create risk; legality without innovation can create rigidity.

India's energy diversification policy should therefore treat Iran as a valuable optional partner, not an exclusive solution. India should maintain dialogue with Iran, prepare for oil and gas opportunities, explore fertilizers and petrochemicals, cooperate on renewables, protect Hormuz stability and keep payment mechanisms ready. At the same time, India should continue relations with Gulf suppliers, Russia, the United States, Africa, Latin America and domestic energy sources. This is *multi-source energy diplomacy*.

In conclusion, energy diversification is the safest future framework for India–Iran energy cooperation. Iran can contribute to diversification if sanctions ease and financial mechanisms improve. In elevated strategic language, energy diversification is the *protective shield through which India can transform energy vulnerability into strategic resilience while keeping Iran as a valuable but carefully managed energy option*.

21.3 Future of Security Cooperation

The future of India–Iran security cooperation will be shaped by terrorism, extremism, Afghanistan, maritime security, narcotics, borderland instability, cyber radicalization, regional conflict and the safety of trade corridors. India and Iran are not military allies, and their defence cooperation remains limited by sanctions, India's ties with the United States and Israel, and Iran's ties with China and Pakistan. Yet security cooperation remains possible in selected areas. The future lies not in formal alliance but in *selective security convergence*.

Security cooperation between India and Iran must be practical and carefully calibrated. The two countries can consult on terrorism, Afghanistan, maritime security, drug trafficking, port security, sea-lane safety, piracy, organized crime and regional stability. They can exchange assessments, hold security dialogues, cooperate in multilateral forums and maintain communication among national security institutions. However, India must avoid entanglement in Iran's regional conflicts, and Iran must understand India's partnerships with other regional actors. This requires *discreet and issue-based security cooperation*.

The strongest areas of future cooperation are counter-terrorism, maritime security and Afghanistan stability. These are areas where India and Iran share real concerns. Both have suffered from terrorism and extremism. Both have interests in secure maritime routes. Both are affected by Afghanistan's instability. These shared concerns can create durable but limited cooperation.

Security cooperation also has a corridor dimension. Chabahar, INSTC and Afghanistan routes require protection against terrorism, smuggling, piracy, narcotics and political disruption. A trade corridor is only as secure as the territory and waters through which it passes. Therefore, security cooperation is necessary for economic cooperation. In this sense, security is the *protective architecture of connectivity*.

In conclusion, the future of India–Iran security cooperation will be selective, cautious and functional. It will not become an alliance, but it can become a valuable mechanism for regional stability. In refined language, India–Iran security cooperation is a *quiet strategic instrument designed to protect corridors, counter extremism and stabilize the western approaches to India's extended neighbourhood*.

21.3.1 Counter-Terrorism

Counter-terrorism is one of the most important future areas of India–Iran security cooperation. India has faced cross-border terrorism, violent extremism and Pakistan-based militant networks for decades. Iran faces threats from Daesh/ISIS, extremist groups, border militancy, narcotics-linked criminal networks and instability in its eastern provinces. Both countries understand that terrorism is not only a domestic security problem but a transnational threat that crosses borders, ideologies and weak state spaces. This creates a foundation for *counter-terror convergence*.

Afghanistan remains central to counter-terrorism cooperation. The presence of extremist groups, the uncertain conduct of the Taliban, the threat of ISIS-Khorasan, narcotics networks and the possibility of militant safe havens concern both India and Iran. India fears anti-India terrorist groups and radical networks. Iran fears extremist spillover, attacks on Shia communities, border insecurity and narcotics flows. These concerns are not identical, but they overlap sufficiently to justify regular consultation.

Counter-terrorism cooperation can include intelligence assessment sharing, dialogue among national security institutions, tracking of extremist propaganda, narcotics-terror links, borderland militancy analysis, regional consultations and cooperation in multilateral forums such as SCO and the United Nations. India and Iran need not create a formal operational alliance; even structured assessment-sharing can be useful. Counter-terrorism begins with *situational awareness*.

The rise of Daesh/ISIS and ISIS-K has created a new layer of concern. These groups do not respect national borders and seek to exploit sectarian tension, weak governance and online radicalization. Iran has direct experience with anti-Iran extremist violence, while India has an interest in preventing radical networks from influencing South Asian security. Both countries can cooperate in understanding recruitment patterns, financing routes, propaganda channels and regional movement of fighters.

Narcotics trafficking is another important issue. Afghanistan has long been connected with narcotics production and trafficking routes. Drug trafficking can finance terrorism, criminal networks and insurgent structures. Iran has suffered severely from narcotics flows from Afghanistan, and India is also concerned about narcotics entering through sea routes, land networks and

organized crime. India–Iran cooperation on narcotics can therefore support counter-terrorism indirectly. This is *narcotics-security linkage*.

Cyber radicalization is a future concern. Extremist groups increasingly use social media, encrypted communication, online propaganda, cryptocurrencies and digital recruitment. India and Iran can exchange experiences on cyber monitoring, de-radicalization, online extremist narratives and legal frameworks, while respecting national laws and privacy standards. Counter-terrorism in the future will be both territorial and digital.

However, counter-terrorism cooperation has limitations. India may be cautious about sharing sensitive intelligence because Iran has ties with actors that India's other partners view suspiciously. Iran may be cautious because India has close relations with the United States and Israel. Therefore, cooperation must be selective and confidence-based. It should begin with areas of common threat rather than highly sensitive intelligence. This is *graduated trust-building*.

Counter-terrorism should also avoid sectarian framing. India's policy must remain non-sectarian. It should cooperate with Iran against terrorism, but not enter Sunni-Shia geopolitical narratives. India's internal pluralism and external interests require a careful language of terrorism, extremism and peace rather than sectarian identity. This gives India credibility across West Asia.

In conclusion, counter-terrorism offers a realistic future area for India–Iran security cooperation. It can focus on Afghanistan, ISIS-K, narcotics, extremist networks, cyber radicalization and regional stability. In elevated security language, counter-terrorism cooperation is the *hard-security bridge through which India and Iran can protect their societies from the transnational contagion of militant extremism*.

21.3.2 Maritime Security

Maritime security is another major future area of India–Iran cooperation. The maritime space connecting India and Iran includes the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf. These waters carry oil, LNG, containers, food, medicines, labour movement and strategic cargo. They are also vulnerable to piracy, terrorism, smuggling, narcotics, drone attacks, mines, tanker seizures, military confrontation and great-power rivalry. For India, maritime security is directly linked with energy, trade and diaspora

welfare. For Iran, it is linked with sovereignty, exports, port security and Gulf influence.

The Strait of Hormuz is central. India's energy security is deeply affected by the safe movement of oil and gas through this chokepoint. Iran's position near Hormuz gives it strategic significance. Any confrontation in or near Hormuz can affect India's economy. Therefore, India has a strong interest in freedom of navigation, safe passage, de-escalation and maritime confidence-building. Iran, too, has an interest in being recognized as an important coastal state in regional maritime security. The challenge is to reconcile Iran's sovereignty concerns with the international interest in open sea lanes.

Chabahar gives India–Iran maritime cooperation a practical foundation. Port security, cargo safety, coastal surveillance, customs control, anti-smuggling measures, seafarer welfare, emergency response, environmental protection and search-and-rescue cooperation can all be developed around Chabahar. Such cooperation is less politically sensitive than military alliance and more directly connected to trade. Chabahar can become a platform for *functional maritime security*.

India has growing maritime capabilities in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy has experience in anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance, evacuation, maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, and protection of sea lanes. Iran has strong knowledge of Gulf waters and regional maritime conditions. Dialogue between the two countries can improve understanding of risks in the Arabian Sea–Gulf of Oman–Hormuz continuum. This does not require joint militarization; it requires *maritime communication and awareness*.

Narcotics and smuggling are important maritime concerns. The Arabian Sea has been used by drug traffickers and criminal networks. Narcotics trafficking can connect with terrorism and organized crime. India and Iran can cooperate through information exchange, coast-guard dialogue, port inspections and regional mechanisms. Maritime security is not only about warships; it is also about preventing illegal economies from using the sea.

Piracy and non-state threats remain relevant. Though piracy patterns shift over time, merchant vessels remain vulnerable in unstable waters. Maritime terrorism, explosive boats, drones and attacks on commercial shipping have become more serious in recent years. India and Iran should discuss these

threats in a professional and non-political manner. Protecting commercial shipping is a shared interest.

Maritime environmental security should also be included. Oil spills, tanker accidents, port pollution and marine disasters can damage coastal societies and economies. India and Iran can cooperate on pollution control, maritime safety standards and emergency response. This would give maritime cooperation a broader developmental character.

However, maritime cooperation has limits because of Iran's confrontation with the United States and some Gulf actors, and India's growing cooperation with the U.S., France, UAE, Oman and other maritime partners. India must avoid being drawn into rival naval coalitions against Iran. At the same time, it must protect freedom of navigation and its own energy routes. This requires *balanced maritime diplomacy*.

In conclusion, maritime security is a promising future area for India–Iran cooperation, especially around Chabahar, sea-lane safety, narcotics control, port security and maritime dialogue. In refined strategic language, maritime security cooperation is the *blue-water shield through which India and Iran can protect trade, energy and connectivity across the Arabian Sea and Gulf approaches*.

21.3.3 Afghanistan Stability

Afghanistan stability will remain a central future concern in India–Iran security cooperation. Afghanistan is the geographic bridge that gives Chabahar and India–Iran connectivity much of their strategic meaning. It is also a source of security anxiety because instability in Afghanistan can produce terrorism, narcotics trafficking, refugee flows, extremist ideology and regional competition. India and Iran both have deep stakes in Afghanistan's future, though their policies and methods differ.

For India, Afghanistan is important because of historical ties, development partnership, security concerns and Pakistan's influence. India has invested in Afghanistan's infrastructure, education, health, Parliament building, dams, roads and humanitarian assistance. India does not want Afghanistan to become a sanctuary for anti-India terrorism or a strategic backyard of Pakistan. For Iran, Afghanistan is even more immediate because of shared borders, refugees, water issues, Shia communities, trade and security spillover. Thus, Afghanistan creates a natural field of India–Iran consultation.

The Taliban's return to power has complicated the situation. Both India and Iran have had to engage pragmatically while remaining cautious. Neither wants Afghanistan to collapse completely, because collapse would create terrorism, refugee flows and humanitarian disaster. At the same time, both are concerned about inclusivity, minority rights, women's rights, terrorism and extremist groups. This creates a policy of *cautious engagement without full trust*.

Chabahar is directly linked with Afghanistan stability. If Afghanistan becomes more stable and trade-oriented, Chabahar can become a major route for Afghan imports and exports. If Afghanistan remains unstable, traders may avoid long routes, cargo movement may be unsafe, and investment may be limited. Therefore, India and Iran have a shared interest in supporting trade, humanitarian assistance and connectivity that encourage Afghan economic stabilization.

Counter-terrorism is also central. ISIS-Khorasan, Al-Qaeda-linked elements, anti-India groups, sectarian militants and regional extremist networks remain concerns. India and Iran can share assessments on these threats and coordinate in regional forums. Iran's concerns about attacks on Shia communities and India's concerns about anti-India terrorism can overlap in the broader fight against extremism. Afghanistan stability requires preventing the country from becoming a *terrorist incubator*.

Narcotics are another shared concern. Afghanistan's narcotics economy has historically affected Iran severely and has implications for India and the wider region. Drug trafficking can finance criminal networks and extremist groups. India and Iran can cooperate on narcotics monitoring, maritime interdiction, border intelligence and international anti-drug frameworks. Security cooperation on Afghanistan must therefore include both terrorism and narcotics.

Humanitarian cooperation offers a constructive path. India has supplied food, medicines and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, and Iran's territory and Chabahar can facilitate such movement. Humanitarian cooperation helps Afghan people and strengthens India–Iran coordination without requiring ideological alignment with Afghan rulers. It is a practical area where diplomacy can produce visible benefit.

Afghanistan stability also requires regional consultation. India and Iran should coordinate with Central Asian states, Russia and other concerned actors where interests overlap. However, India must remain cautious about forums that include Pakistan in ways that dilute India's security concerns. Iran must balance its own relations with Pakistan, China and Russia. Therefore, Afghanistan cooperation will remain useful but complex.

Water, refugees and border security are especially important for Iran. India should understand these Iranian concerns because they shape Tehran's Afghanistan policy. Iran's engagement with Afghan authorities may sometimes appear more direct than India's, but geography compels Iran to deal with immediate problems. India should approach this with strategic empathy. Understanding Iran's compulsions can reduce misperception.

In conclusion, Afghanistan stability will remain a major future area of India–Iran security cooperation. It connects Chabahar, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance, narcotics control, refugees and Central Asian access. In elevated geopolitical language, Afghanistan is the *unstable continental corridor whose peace can transform India–Iran connectivity into reality and whose disorder can turn strategic promise into perpetual vulnerability*.

Concluding Observation

The future of India–Iran energy and security cooperation will depend upon realism, legality, implementation and strategic patience. Energy cooperation can revive through oil trade, gas-linked industries, petrochemicals, fertilizers, LPG, renewables and diversification, but only if sanctions, payment and shipping issues are managed. Security cooperation can expand through counter-terrorism, maritime security and Afghanistan stability, but it must remain selective, discreet and issue-based.

India and Iran should not seek an unrealistic alliance. They should build a pragmatic partnership around sectors where interests truly converge. Energy, Chabahar, Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, maritime safety and supply-chain resilience offer such convergence. In the larger future of India–Iran geopolitics, these areas represent the *strategic sinews through which geography, security and economic necessity can be joined into a durable partnership*.

21.4 Future Diplomatic Direction

The future diplomatic direction of India–Iran relations will depend upon the ability of both countries to move beyond episodic engagement and build a durable, balanced and implementation-oriented partnership. India and Iran do not require a formal alliance; they require a *strategic understanding* based on geography, connectivity, trade, security consultation, cultural affinity and mutual respect for sovereign compulsions. The future will not be shaped by emotional declarations alone. It will be shaped by whether India can maintain Iran as an important partner while preserving its relations with the West, Israel and Gulf Arab states, and whether Iran can treat India as a serious Asian partner without reducing its foreign policy excessively to China, Russia or sanctions-driven blocs.

The central diplomatic challenge before India is balance. Iran is strategically valuable for Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, energy diversification, maritime geography and civilizational diplomacy. At the same time, the United States is central to India's technology, defence, trade and Indo-Pacific strategy; Israel is important for defence, agriculture, water and innovation; Gulf Arab states are indispensable for energy, investment, remittances and diaspora welfare; Europe remains important for trade, technology and global governance. India's future diplomatic direction must therefore avoid *exclusive alignment* and strengthen *multi-directional engagement*.

The central diplomatic challenge before Iran is diversification. Under sanctions and Western pressure, Iran has moved closer to China and Russia, but excessive dependence on any single great power can reduce Iranian autonomy. India offers Iran an alternative Asian partnership with civilizational depth, commercial promise, pharmaceutical and food-security value, and access to a major rising economy. Iran's future diplomacy should therefore treat India not as a secondary partner but as an important component of its own *Asian diversification strategy*.

For India, the future direction should be based on *strategic autonomy*, *issue-based diplomacy* and *practical delivery*. India should cooperate with Iran where interests converge—Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, food trade, pharmaceuticals, culture, education, maritime dialogue and counter-terrorism consultation—while managing differences on Israel, the United States, nuclear issues, Gulf politics, China and Pakistan. This requires diplomatic

maturity. Countries need not agree on everything to cooperate meaningfully in selected areas.

The future also demands institutionalization. Foreign Office Consultations, Joint Commission Meetings, security consultations, consular mechanisms, port working groups, customs cooperation, business councils, university exchanges and cultural centres must meet regularly and produce measurable outcomes. The relationship should not depend only on occasional high-level visits. A serious partnership requires *bureaucratic continuity, commercial participation and policy memory*.

India and Iran must also manage expectations. Iran should understand that India cannot ignore U.S. sanctions, Israel ties and Gulf partnerships. India should understand that Iran cannot ignore China, Pakistan, Russia and its own security anxieties. Mutual realism can reduce disappointment. The future diplomatic direction should therefore be based on *expectation discipline*. Diplomatic disappointment often arises not from hostility but from unrealistic assumptions.

In conclusion, the future diplomatic direction of India–Iran relations must be balanced, independent, pragmatic and execution-oriented. The relationship should neither be exaggerated into an alliance nor reduced to occasional symbolism. In refined diplomatic language, the future of India–Iran diplomacy lies in the *careful cultivation of a strategic partnership that remains civilizational in memory, geoeconomic in purpose, autonomous in method and prudent in execution*.

21.4.1 Balanced Relations With Iran and the West

Balanced relations with Iran and the West will remain one of India's most important diplomatic tasks. India cannot afford to choose one side completely against the other. Iran is essential for India's westward connectivity, Afghanistan access, Central Asian outreach, energy possibilities and historical-cultural diplomacy. The West, especially the United States and Europe, is essential for technology, defence cooperation, investment, education, trade, climate finance, global governance and strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific. India's future foreign policy must therefore be an exercise in *simultaneous diplomatic management*.

The United States is a major partner for India. India–U.S. relations have expanded in defence, technology, space, semiconductors, education,

investment, energy, diaspora and Indo-Pacific strategy. India cannot jeopardize this relationship through reckless sanctions exposure. At the same time, India cannot surrender its Iran policy entirely to U.S. preferences because India's interests in Chabahar, Afghanistan and Central Asia are distinct. The correct approach is *negotiated autonomy*: India should engage Washington transparently while preserving legitimate strategic space with Tehran.

Europe also matters. European countries are important for trade, technology, higher education, climate cooperation, defence industry, maritime security and multilateral diplomacy. Many European actors share concerns about Iran's nuclear programme and regional behaviour, yet they also recognize the importance of diplomacy and non-proliferation arrangements. India can use its dialogue with Europe to explain the developmental and connectivity value of Chabahar. India should frame its Iran engagement not as sanctions defiance but as *regional stabilization through connectivity*.

Iran, on the other hand, must remain central to India's extended neighbourhood policy. India should not allow sanctions pressure to eliminate Iran from its strategic map. If India withdraws from Iran, China gains greater space. If Chabahar weakens, Pakistan's transit denial becomes more powerful. If India ignores Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia policy lose an essential route. Thus, balanced relations with Iran and the West are not merely diplomatic convenience; they are a strategic necessity.

Israel adds another layer. India's relations with Israel are valuable in defence, intelligence, agriculture, water technology, innovation and counter-terrorism. Iran sees Israel as a hostile power. India must separate these relationships. India-Israel cooperation should not be presented as anti-Iran, and India-Iran cooperation should not be presented as anti-Israel. This is the principle of *de-hyphenated diplomacy*. India's partners must understand that India's foreign policy is not a derivative of their rivalries.

Gulf Arab states also belong to this balance. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain are critical for India's energy, diaspora, remittances, investment and maritime interests. India must reassure Gulf partners that its Iran engagement is not sectarian or anti-Gulf. India's Iran policy should be explained as connectivity-oriented, development-oriented and regionally stabilizing. Balanced diplomacy requires reassurance to all sides.

The future of balanced relations will depend upon language and action. India should continue to use careful diplomatic language on Iran-related crises, emphasizing dialogue, restraint, peaceful settlement, protection of civilians, maritime security and regional stability. It should avoid inflammatory rhetoric. At the same time, it must act firmly to protect Chabahar, Indian citizens, energy security and trade interests. This is *calibrated firmness*.

Balanced relations also require diversification of cooperation sectors. India can keep sensitive sectors such as oil and defence cautious when sanctions are strict, while expanding less sensitive areas such as pharmaceuticals, food trade, education, culture, customs cooperation, medical products, tourism and permitted connectivity. This layered approach reduces risk and preserves engagement. It is a form of *sanctions-aware partnership management*.

In conclusion, India's future diplomacy must maintain balanced relations with Iran and the West. It should not become captive to U.S.–Iran hostility, Iran–Israel rivalry or Gulf anxieties. In elevated diplomatic language, balanced relations with Iran and the West are the *delicate diplomatic equilibrium through which India protects its strategic autonomy while keeping multiple doors open in a divided international order*.

21.4.2 India's Role as an Independent Asian Power

India's future role as an independent Asian power will shape its Iran policy profoundly. India is no longer only a South Asian state concerned with its immediate neighbourhood. It is a rising Asian and global power with interests across the Indo-Pacific, West Asia, Central Asia, Africa, Europe and the global commons. Its diplomacy must therefore reflect confidence, responsibility and independent judgment. In this larger role, India's relationship with Iran becomes a test of its ability to manage complexity without strategic subordination.

An independent Asian power does not blindly follow another country's geopolitical preferences. Nor does it act irresponsibly merely to display independence. True independence means the ability to judge each issue by national interest, legal prudence, regional stability and long-term consequences. India's Iran policy must therefore be neither submissive nor reckless. It must be *sovereign, measured and purposeful*.

India's independence is visible in its policy of multi-alignment. India works with the United States in the Indo-Pacific, maintains defence and energy ties

with Russia, cooperates with Israel in technology and security, deepens Gulf partnerships, engages Iran on Chabahar, participates in BRICS and SCO, and builds ties with Europe, Japan, ASEAN and Africa. This multi-alignment is not confusion; it is an expression of India's status as a major Asian actor with multiple interests. Iran fits into this wider diplomatic architecture.

India's independent role also requires building alternatives. A power that depends entirely on routes controlled by adversaries cannot be fully autonomous. Chabahar is therefore linked to India's independent role. It gives India an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. It reduces dependence on Pakistan. It creates space in Eurasia. It allows India to demonstrate that it can build connectivity beyond its immediate borders. Thus, Chabahar is not only an India–Iran project; it is an instrument of India's *independent Asian agency*.

India's role as an independent Asian power also requires engagement with all major Asian civilizations. Iran is one of Asia's oldest civilizations and an important West Asian power. Ignoring Iran would impoverish India's Asian diplomacy. India's future foreign policy must include China management, Gulf partnerships, Central Asian outreach, Iranian engagement, Southeast Asian cooperation and Indo-Pacific strategy. Asia cannot be understood only through the Pacific; it also includes the *Eurasian westward arc*.

India's independent role must also be developmental. It should not copy older great-power habits of domination. India's credibility will increase if it offers connectivity, capacity building, medicines, food security, education, technology, humanitarian assistance and cultural respect. With Iran, this means strengthening Chabahar, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, education, cultural diplomacy and regional trade. India's influence should be *developmental rather than coercive*.

At the same time, India must be realistic about its limitations. It cannot replace China's financial scale in Iran overnight. It cannot remove sanctions by itself. It cannot solve Iran–Israel conflict alone. It cannot stabilize Afghanistan independently. But it can preserve options, deliver selected projects, maintain dialogue and build long-term trust. An independent power does not need omnipotence; it needs consistency and credibility.

India's intellectual tradition also supports such independence. From non-alignment to strategic autonomy and from strategic autonomy to multi-

alignment, India has sought to preserve decision-making space. S. Jaishankar's *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* emphasizes that India must navigate a world of convergences and contradictions with self-confidence. This idea is highly relevant to Iran policy, where contradictions are unavoidable and choices must be calibrated.

In conclusion, India's role as an independent Asian power requires a mature and balanced Iran policy. India should neither abandon Iran under Western pressure nor ignore Western partnerships for the sake of Iran. It should act as a confident power that protects its own interests and contributes to regional stability. In refined language, India's independent Asian role is the *sovereign diplomatic posture through which New Delhi transforms civilizational confidence, economic rise and strategic autonomy into practical regional influence*.

21.4.3 Iran's Role in India's Extended Neighbourhood

Iran has a central role in India's extended neighbourhood. The concept of extended neighbourhood refers to regions beyond India's immediate borders but directly relevant to India's security, economy, culture and strategic interests. West Asia, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean form part of this extended neighbourhood. Iran is located at the intersection of all these spaces. This makes it a state of exceptional relevance for India.

Iran connects India with Afghanistan. Because Pakistan blocks India's direct land access, Iran provides an alternative route through Chabahar. This gives Iran a functional role in India's Afghan policy. Humanitarian assistance, development supplies, food, medicines and potential trade can move through Iranian territory. Afghanistan's future stability therefore gives Iran a continuing place in India's extended neighbourhood strategy.

Iran connects India with Central Asia. India's engagement with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan requires physical connectivity. Iran's transport networks, ports and rail-road systems can help India reach these landlocked states. Without Iran, India's Central Asian outreach remains geographically constrained. With Iran, it gains a realistic southern corridor. Thus, Iran is the *geographical hinge of India–Central Asia connectivity*.

Iran also connects India with the Persian Gulf. The Gulf is vital for India's energy security, trade, maritime routes and diaspora welfare. Iran's coastline and strategic position near the Strait of Hormuz make it essential to the Gulf security equation. Even when India's relations with Gulf Arab states are deeper economically, Iran remains a major factor in regional stability. India's extended neighbourhood policy must therefore engage Iran as a Gulf power.

Iran is also relevant to the Indian Ocean. The Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea link Iran with India's maritime space. Chabahar lies on this maritime interface. India's naval and commercial interests in the western Indian Ocean are connected with developments around Iran, Oman, the Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Iran is therefore not only a continental partner but also a maritime neighbour in the extended strategic sense.

Culturally, Iran is part of India's extended civilizational neighbourhood. Persian influence on Indian language, literature, architecture, music, cuisine and social etiquette gives Iran a unique place in India's historical consciousness. This cultural inheritance strengthens diplomacy. Strategic geography and civilizational memory together make Iran more than a transactional partner. It is a *civilizational neighbour beyond borders*.

Iran's role in India's extended neighbourhood is also shaped by China. If China expands influence in Iran, Central Asia and Pakistan while India remains passive, India's western strategic space narrows. Engaging Iran helps India prevent strategic exclusion. India need not ask Iran to choose India over China, but it should ensure that Iran has a meaningful Indian option. This is *presence-based balancing*.

Iran's domestic stability also matters for India. Internal instability in Iran can affect energy markets, shipping routes, Chabahar, Indian citizens, regional security and Afghanistan-linked corridors. India therefore has an interest in a stable, sovereign and responsibly engaged Iran. This does not mean interference in Iran's internal politics; it means recognition that Iran's stability affects India's extended neighbourhood.

The future role of Iran in India's extended neighbourhood should be organized through a comprehensive framework. This framework should include Chabahar, INSTC, Central Asia outreach, Afghanistan consultation, energy dialogue, maritime security, pharmaceuticals, food trade, culture, education and people-to-people contact. Such a framework would prevent the

relationship from depending too heavily on one sector. It would create *multi-sectoral resilience*.

India should also maintain regular strategic dialogue with Iran on regional developments. Afghanistan, the Gulf, Central Asia, Caucasus, maritime routes, terrorism and sanctions should be discussed systematically. Iran's perspective is valuable because of its location and historical involvement in these regions. India may not agree with Iran on all issues, but understanding Iran's view is necessary for informed policy.

In conclusion, Iran's role in India's extended neighbourhood is indispensable. It is a corridor state, Gulf power, Central Asian gateway, Afghanistan interlocutor, maritime actor and civilizational partner. In elevated geopolitical language, Iran is the *western strategic archway of India's extended neighbourhood, through which New Delhi's interests pass from the Indian Ocean toward Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Gulf and Eurasia*.

Concluding Observation

The future diplomatic direction of India–Iran geopolitics must be balanced, independent and strategically realistic. India must preserve relations with Iran while deepening ties with the West, Israel and Gulf Arab states. It must act as an independent Asian power that neither submits to external pressure nor ignores legal and geopolitical constraints. It must recognize Iran as a vital actor in its extended neighbourhood and a necessary partner for Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia and regional stability.

The future of India–Iran relations will not be determined by sentiment alone. It will be determined by whether the two countries can institutionalize trust, protect Chabahar, manage sanctions, expand permitted trade, consult on Afghanistan, and maintain diplomatic balance in a turbulent region. In the grand architecture of Indian foreign policy, Iran will remain a *difficult but indispensable partner*, and India's success will depend upon its ability to practise *strategic autonomy with patience, precision and geopolitical imagination*.

Chapter 22: Conclusion

India–Iran relations since 1947 present one of the most intricate cases of Asian diplomacy, where civilization, geography, ideology, energy, sanctions, ports, maritime routes, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, the United States, Israel and the Gulf all meet within a single bilateral relationship. This relationship cannot be understood through one lens alone. It is not merely cultural, not merely economic, not merely strategic, not merely religious and not merely transactional. It is a *multi-layered geopolitical relationship* in which ancient civilizational memory interacts with modern national interest.

The book has argued that India and Iran are connected by a deep historical inheritance, but their modern relationship has passed through several transformations. The ancient Indo-Iranian world, Persianate culture, Sufi connections, Indo-Persian literature, Mughal diplomacy, trade routes and maritime links created a long civilizational foundation. After 1947, however, modern geopolitics created new constraints. The Cold War, Iran's alignment with the West under the Shah, Pakistan's role, India's non-alignment, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran–Iraq War, the end of the Cold War, Afghanistan's instability, U.S. sanctions, the nuclear issue, China's rise and India's multi-alignment all reshaped the relationship.

The essential conclusion of this book is that Iran remains indispensable to India's western strategic imagination. Iran is not only a neighbour of India's extended neighbourhood; it is a *geostrategic gateway* to Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian region and Eurasia. For India, which faces Pakistan's denial of direct land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, Iran offers a rare corridor of strategic possibility. Chabahar Port is the most visible expression of this possibility. Through Chabahar, India seeks to convert sea power into continental access, commercial aspiration into logistics, and strategic autonomy into practical connectivity.

At the same time, the book has shown that India–Iran relations remain heavily constrained. Sanctions have damaged oil trade, banking channels, investment, shipping, insurance and private-sector confidence. Iran's nuclear

issue, U.S.–Iran hostility, Iran–Israel conflict, Gulf rivalries and China’s growing presence have complicated India’s choices. The relationship is therefore best described as a *strategically necessary but operationally constrained partnership*. Its future will depend not on sentiment but on execution, financial innovation, diplomatic balance and institutional trust.

22.1 Summary of India–Iran Relations Since 1947

India–Iran relations since 1947 may be divided into several broad phases. The first phase, from Indian independence to the Iranian Revolution, was marked by limited political warmth but historical awareness. India adopted non-alignment, while Iran under the Shah remained linked with the Western security system. Pakistan’s role and Cold War alignments prevented deeper strategic convergence. However, cultural respect and diplomatic contact continued.

The second phase began after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Iran’s foreign policy changed dramatically, and its relations with the West deteriorated. India responded cautiously, maintaining diplomatic engagement while avoiding ideological entanglement. During the Iran–Iraq War, India followed a careful policy and preserved relations with both sides. This period showed India’s preference for *balanced engagement* rather than bloc-based alignment.

The third phase began after the end of the Cold War and India’s economic liberalization. With the Soviet Union gone, West Asia transformed and India’s energy needs rising, Iran became more important. Afghanistan, Central Asia and energy security brought India and Iran closer. The Tehran Declaration of 2001 and the New Delhi Declaration of 2003 reflected this renewed strategic convergence. Iran began to be seen not only as a cultural partner but as a *strategic corridor state*.

The fourth phase emerged after 2005, when Iran’s nuclear issue and U.S. sanctions increasingly affected the relationship. India wished to maintain energy and connectivity cooperation with Iran, but it also had to protect its growing relationship with the United States. India’s votes at international forums, reduction in oil imports and payment difficulties created tensions. This period highlighted the difficulty of practising *strategic autonomy under sanctions pressure*.

The fifth phase began with the renewed emphasis on Chabahar and regional connectivity, especially after India's intensified interest in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2016 visit to Iran and the India–Iran–Afghanistan trilateral agreement gave Chabahar a central place in India's foreign policy. Chabahar represented India's answer to Pakistan's transit denial and China–Pakistan corridor expansion. It became the *geo-economic nucleus* of contemporary India–Iran relations.

The most recent phase is shaped by the Taliban's return in Afghanistan, U.S. sanctions, the 2024 long-term Chabahar contract, Iran's membership in SCO and BRICS, China's increasing role, and West Asian conflicts. India has continued engagement with Iran while deepening relations with the United States, Israel and Gulf Arab states. This shows that India–Iran relations have entered a phase of *calibrated persistence*: cooperation continues, but within a carefully managed diplomatic and financial framework.

22.1.1 Historical Continuity

Historical continuity is the first major feature of India–Iran relations. Long before the creation of modern states, the Indian and Iranian civilizational worlds interacted through language, religion, migration, trade, art, philosophy, poetry, Sufism, architecture and courtly culture. The Indo-Iranian connection is therefore not a recent diplomatic construction; it is an ancient civilizational process. This continuity gives the relationship a special emotional and cultural depth.

Persian influence on India is one of the strongest examples of this continuity. Persian language shaped Indian administration, literature, historiography, poetry, diplomacy, etiquette and court culture for centuries. Indo-Persian literature became one of the richest literary traditions of Asia. Works such as *Akbarnama*, *Ain-i-Akbari*, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* and many Persian chronicles of India show how deeply Persian became embedded in Indian historical consciousness. The book *India in the Persianate Age, 1000–1765* by Richard M. Eaton is especially important for understanding this long Indo-Persian cultural formation.

Cultural continuity also appears in architecture and art. Mughal gardens, arches, domes, calligraphy, miniature painting, manuscript culture and Indo-Persian aesthetics created a visual civilization of extraordinary beauty. Humayun's Tomb, the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, Red Fort, Mughal gardens,

Deccani monuments and Awadh's imambaras are part of this Indo-Persian world. They are not merely historical monuments; they are *stone-written memories of Indo-Iranian civilizational exchange*.

Religious and social continuity is also visible through Sufi traditions, Shia cultural linkages, Muharram practices, pilgrimage routes, Persian theological literature and the Parsi community in India. The Parsi community, with its origins in ancient Iranian Zoroastrian tradition, made an extraordinary contribution to India's industry, education, science, philanthropy and public life. This is a powerful example of how Iranian-origin communities became deeply integrated into India's national life.

Even after 1947, this historical continuity continued to influence diplomacy. India and Iran repeatedly referred to civilizational ties, cultural exchanges, people-to-people links and shared heritage. Such references are not decorative rhetoric; they provide the relationship with a foundation of mutual respect. When trade declines or sanctions create difficulty, cultural continuity helps preserve goodwill.

In conclusion, historical continuity is the deepest layer of India–Iran relations. It reminds us that the relationship is older than modern geopolitics and broader than temporary policy disputes. In refined language, historical continuity is the *civilizational bedrock upon which the modern edifice of India–Iran diplomacy continues to stand*.

22.1.2 Strategic Transformation

The second major feature of India–Iran relations since 1947 is strategic transformation. The relationship gradually moved from cultural familiarity and limited diplomacy toward energy cooperation, regional connectivity, Afghanistan consultation, maritime relevance and Central Asian access. This transformation reflects changes in both international politics and India's own rise.

During the Cold War, India and Iran were constrained by different alignments. India's non-aligned but Soviet-leaning posture and Iran's pro-Western orientation under the Shah limited strategic closeness. Pakistan also complicated relations because Iran maintained ties with Pakistan through Western-backed regional arrangements. Thus, despite historical affinity, the relationship remained strategically modest.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 changed Iran's foreign policy identity. Iran became anti-Western, revolutionary and more isolated from the U.S.-led order. India maintained engagement but avoided ideological entanglement. The relationship did not immediately become strategic, but the basis for future convergence slowly emerged. Both countries developed reasons to preserve diplomatic communication in a turbulent region.

The end of the Cold War transformed the strategic landscape. India's economic liberalization increased energy demand. Afghanistan became a major area of concern after the rise of the Taliban. Central Asia emerged as a new geopolitical space after the Soviet collapse. Pakistan continued to obstruct India's land access. Iran's geography suddenly became much more important. This was the period when Iran began to emerge in Indian thinking as a *gateway state*.

The strategic transformation became clearer through Chabahar. For India, Chabahar was not an ordinary port project. It was a way to bypass Pakistan, support Afghanistan, reach Central Asia, balance China–Pakistan corridor influence and strengthen India's presence in the western Indian Ocean–Eurasian interface. In this sense, Chabahar transformed India–Iran relations from a primarily bilateral relationship into a *regional connectivity partnership*.

Energy cooperation also played a major role in strategic transformation. Iran's oil supplied India and gave the relationship commercial weight. Even after sanctions reduced oil trade, Iran's energy potential remained relevant. The book *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World* by Daniel Yergin helps explain why energy trade is never merely commercial; it is deeply connected with national power, vulnerability and strategic calculation.

Security cooperation also transformed the relationship. Terrorism, Afghanistan, narcotics, extremism, maritime security and regional instability created areas of shared concern. India and Iran did not become military allies, but they developed a basis for *selective security consultation*. This was especially important in relation to Afghanistan and sea-lane security.

In conclusion, the relationship underwent a strategic transformation from cultural affinity to geopolitical utility. Iran became important to India not only because of history but because of geography, energy, Afghanistan and Central

Asia. In elevated geopolitical language, strategic transformation converted India–Iran relations from a *civilizational relationship of memory into a strategic relationship of access, balance and regional relevance*.

22.1.3 Contemporary Relevance

The contemporary relevance of India–Iran relations is extremely high despite low trade volume and sanctions. Iran remains important for India's Chabahar strategy, Afghanistan policy, Central Asian outreach, energy diversification, maritime security, cultural diplomacy and balancing of China–Pakistan connectivity. The relationship is therefore not defined only by current trade figures; it is defined by long-term strategic utility.

Chabahar is the most important contemporary pillar. It gives India a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia without passing through Pakistan. It allows India to participate in Eurasian connectivity and support regional trade. It also gives Iran a development opportunity in its south-eastern region. Chabahar's relevance will only increase if Afghanistan and Central Asia seek diversified access to the sea. It is the *operational centre* of contemporary India–Iran relations.

Afghanistan gives the relationship continuing relevance. India and Iran both worry about terrorism, extremism, narcotics and instability. Although their policies toward the Taliban may differ, their concerns overlap. Iran's geography makes it unavoidable in Afghan affairs. India's historical investment in Afghanistan makes it interested in any regional framework that can stabilize the country. This makes India–Iran consultation necessary.

Central Asia also increases Iran's relevance. India wants stronger relations with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but lack of land access remains a major limitation. Iran's territory and transport networks can help India reach these states. Therefore, Iran's relevance lies in its ability to connect India with the *landlocked heart of Eurasia*.

Energy remains relevant even when oil trade is restricted. Iran's oil and gas resources are too significant to disappear from India's long-term energy thinking. If sanctions ease, Iranian crude, gas-related industries, petrochemicals and fertilizers may again become important. Even without oil imports, Iran's location near the Strait of Hormuz affects India's energy security. Thus, Iran matters as both a resource holder and a chokepoint-adjacent power.

China's role also increases Iran's relevance. As China expands through CPEC, Gwadar, the Belt and Road Initiative and relations with Iran, India must maintain presence in Iran to avoid strategic exclusion. India's engagement with Iran is not anti-China in a simplistic sense, but it helps preserve India's options in a region where China is increasingly active. Iran is therefore part of India's *connectivity-balancing strategy*.

In conclusion, contemporary relevance is based on practical geopolitics. Iran remains a necessary partner for India's western and north-western strategic outreach. In refined language, Iran's contemporary relevance lies in its position as the *geographic, economic and diplomatic hinge between India's maritime strength and its continental aspirations*.

22.2 Main Findings of the Book

This book has examined India–Iran relations through history, culture, geopolitics, energy, connectivity, sanctions, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, the United States, Israel, Gulf rivalries, security, trade and future prospects. The main findings show that India–Iran relations are important but difficult, promising but constrained, historically warm but operationally complex. The relationship cannot be judged by one dimension alone.

The first finding is that Iran is a strategic gateway for India. Geography gives Iran a unique position in India's extended neighbourhood. The second finding is that Chabahar is the core of India–Iran connectivity. The third finding is that sanctions are the major obstacle. The fourth finding is that Afghanistan, Pakistan and China shape the relationship profoundly. The fifth finding is that India's policy is based on strategic autonomy. These findings together explain the nature of India–Iran relations in the twenty-first century.

The book has also shown that India–Iran relations are not static. They have evolved from cultural memory to strategic necessity. They have survived ideological differences, sanctions, energy disruption, diplomatic pressure and regional instability. Their future will depend upon whether both countries can move from symbolic friendship to measurable cooperation.

22.2.1 Iran Is a Strategic Gateway for India

The most important finding of the book is that Iran is a strategic gateway for India. This gateway function is geographical, economic, diplomatic and civilizational. Iran connects India with Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Persian

Gulf, the Caspian region and wider Eurasia. For India, whose direct land access to these regions is blocked by Pakistan, Iran's importance is extraordinary.

Iran's geography gives it value that cannot be replaced easily. It sits between the Indian Ocean system and the Eurasian landmass. Its ports, roads and railways can connect the Arabian Sea with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its location near the Strait of Hormuz makes it central to energy security. Its cultural links with India give it soft-power depth. This combination makes Iran a *multi-dimensional gateway*.

The strategic gateway role is especially important for Central Asia. India's engagement with Central Asia has often been limited by lack of physical connectivity. Iran offers the most realistic route for India to reach the region. Through Chabahar, Iranian transport networks and INSTC, India can build a corridor toward Central Asia and beyond. This is why Iran is indispensable for India's *Eurasian access strategy*.

Iran is also a gateway to Afghanistan. India's ability to support Afghanistan through trade, humanitarian assistance and development becomes more practical through Iranian routes. Chabahar provides India with a way to bypass Pakistan and maintain independent access. In a region where geography is often used as a weapon, Iran gives India an alternative.

Iran's gateway role is not only physical. It is also diplomatic. Iran has influence in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Central Asia and wider West Asia. India may not always agree with Iran, but it benefits from understanding Iran's perspective. Engagement with Iran improves India's situational awareness in its extended neighbourhood.

In conclusion, Iran's gateway role is the central reason India–Iran relations matter. In elevated language, Iran is the *western strategic portal through which India seeks access to Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Gulf and Eurasia beyond the limitations of South Asian geography*.

22.2.2 Chabahar Is the Core of India–Iran Connectivity

The second major finding is that Chabahar is the core of India–Iran connectivity. Chabahar is not merely one project among many; it is the central operational instrument through which India's Iran policy becomes practical.

It connects maritime strategy with continental access, diplomacy with logistics, and strategic autonomy with commercial possibility.

Chabahar's importance lies in its ability to bypass Pakistan. Pakistan's denial of overland access has long restricted India's trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Chabahar gives India an alternative route through the Arabian Sea and Iran. This reduces India's dependence on Pakistan's cooperation and strengthens India's strategic autonomy.

Chabahar also supports Afghanistan. It can serve as a route for humanitarian supplies, food, medicines, development goods and commercial trade. Afghanistan's landlocked geography makes alternative access to seaports highly valuable. If Afghanistan's trade diversifies through Chabahar, Pakistan's monopoly over Afghan transit weakens. This increases Afghanistan's economic options and India's regional reach.

Chabahar's future also depends on Central Asia. Its full value will be realized only if it becomes a regional hub used by Central Asian states. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan need diversified sea access. If Chabahar becomes a reliable route, India–Central Asia trade can expand. This would give India's Central Asia policy a physical foundation.

The book has also shown that Chabahar must move beyond symbolism. A port becomes important through cargo, shipping, banking, customs, warehousing, rail-road connectivity and private-sector participation. Strategic speeches cannot substitute for logistics. Chabahar's success requires *execution discipline*.

Sanctions remain a major danger for Chabahar. Banks, insurers, investors and shipping companies may hesitate if legal protection is uncertain. India must therefore continue diplomatic efforts to preserve Chabahar's operational space. Iran must also provide administrative efficiency and commercial attractiveness.

In conclusion, Chabahar is the core of India–Iran connectivity because it converts strategic geography into a working route. In refined geopolitical language, Chabahar is the *maritime hinge through which India's western strategy turns toward Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia*.

22.2.3 Sanctions Are the Major Obstacle

The third major finding is that sanctions are the biggest obstacle in India–Iran relations. Sanctions affect oil trade, banking, shipping, insurance, investment, infrastructure, private-sector confidence and Chabahar. They do not merely restrict Iran; they also restrict India’s ability to cooperate with Iran in areas of legitimate national interest. Sanctions are the *external financial wall* around India–Iran cooperation.

The most visible impact of sanctions has been on energy trade. Iranian oil was once a major component of India–Iran trade. After sanctions intensified, Indian imports of Iranian crude declined sharply. This reduced total trade volume and weakened the economic base of the relationship. Food, pharmaceuticals and agricultural trade continued, but they could not replace the value of oil trade.

Banking is the second major impact. Even legal trade in food, medicines and agricultural commodities becomes difficult when banks fear sanctions exposure. This produces over-compliance. Exporters may have buyers, and importers may have demand, but payment mechanisms fail. Commerce requires trust; sanctions create hesitation.

Chabahar is also affected. India has argued that Chabahar serves Afghanistan, Central Asia and regional development, but the sanctions environment still creates uncertainty. Companies and banks hesitate because future U.S. policy may change. This weakens the port’s commercial ecosystem. A project may be politically supported but commercially underused if sanctions risk remains high.

Sanctions also indirectly strengthen China’s role in Iran. When Indian, European and other companies reduce engagement, China gains more room as a risk-tolerant partner and buyer of Iranian oil. This may increase Iran’s dependence on China and reduce India’s influence. Thus, sanctions create strategic consequences beyond economics.

India’s response must be realistic. It cannot ignore sanctions, but it should not abandon Iran. It must negotiate space for Chabahar, humanitarian trade, pharmaceuticals, food products, education and cultural cooperation. It must design transparent payment mechanisms and protect its financial reputation. The correct approach is *sanctions-aware strategic persistence*.

In conclusion, sanctions are the major obstacle because they transform political conflict into economic paralysis. In elevated language, sanctions are the *financial chokepoint through which external power compresses India–Iran trade, energy cooperation and connectivity ambitions*.

22.2.4 Afghanistan, Pakistan and China Shape the Relationship

The fourth major finding is that Afghanistan, Pakistan and China shape India–Iran relations profoundly. The relationship cannot be understood only through India and Iran. It must be studied through a regional triangle of instability, obstruction and competition. Afghanistan provides the need for cooperation; Pakistan creates the access problem; China creates the strategic competition.

Afghanistan is central because it connects India and Iran strategically. Both countries are concerned about terrorism, extremism, narcotics, instability and humanitarian crisis. Chabahar's value is closely linked with Afghanistan's ability to use alternative routes. If Afghanistan stabilizes and trade grows, Chabahar becomes more important. If Afghanistan remains unstable, India–Iran connectivity remains vulnerable.

Pakistan shapes the relationship by blocking India's direct land access. India's inability to use Pakistani territory for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia makes Iran indispensable. Chabahar is India's response to Pakistan's transit denial. Pakistan's role in terrorism, Afghanistan and China-backed corridor politics also affects India's view of Iran.

China shapes the relationship through CPEC, Gwadar, Belt and Road projects, Central Asian engagement and growing ties with Iran. China's presence in Pakistan and Iran creates a strategic challenge for India. If India does not maintain active engagement with Iran, China may gain disproportionate influence. India–Iran cooperation is therefore part of India's wider effort to remain present in western and central Asian connectivity.

The interaction of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China creates the strategic logic of Chabahar. Afghanistan needs access, Pakistan blocks access, and China expands competing corridors. Iran offers India an alternative. Therefore, India–Iran relations are shaped by a broader regional geometry.

This does not mean Iran is simply an instrument against Pakistan or China. Iran has its own interests and maintains relations with Pakistan and China. India must understand Iran's compulsions. At the same time, Iran must

understand India's concerns. Mature diplomacy requires recognition of each other's regional pressures.

In conclusion, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China shape the relationship by creating both necessity and difficulty. In refined geopolitical language, this triangle forms the *regional strategic frame within which India and Iran must convert geography into opportunity while managing instability, obstruction and competition.*

22.2.5 India's Policy Is Based on Strategic Autonomy

The fifth major finding is that India's Iran policy is based on strategic autonomy. India does not wish to be trapped in U.S.–Iran hostility, Iran–Israel rivalry, Gulf tensions or China–Pakistan corridor politics. It seeks to maintain independent relations with all major actors according to its national interest. This is the essence of India's *strategic autonomy*.

Strategic autonomy does not mean isolation. India works closely with the United States, Israel, Gulf Arab states, Russia, Europe and Japan. At the same time, it maintains relations with Iran because Iran serves India's connectivity, energy and regional interests. This is not contradiction; it is multi-alignment. India's foreign policy operates through *many partnerships, not one dependency*.

India's strategic autonomy is visible in Chabahar. Despite U.S. sanctions pressure, India has continued to treat Chabahar as important because it serves Afghanistan, Central Asia and India's national interest. India must negotiate with the United States and reassure Iran simultaneously. This requires careful diplomacy.

Strategic autonomy is also visible in India's approach to Israel and Iran. India has strong ties with Israel in defence and technology, while also preserving Iran relations. India does not allow Israel–Iran hostility to dictate its entire West Asia policy. It separates issues and engages partners according to sectoral interests. This is *issue-based diplomacy*.

Strategic autonomy is also essential for energy. India must diversify suppliers, maintain ties with Gulf producers, explore Iranian possibilities when legal conditions permit, and protect maritime routes. Energy security cannot be surrendered to ideological alignment. It requires flexible and practical diplomacy.

However, strategic autonomy requires capacity. A weak country cannot easily resist pressure. India's economic growth, maritime reach, diplomatic credibility and global partnerships strengthen its ability to practise autonomy. The stronger India becomes, the more effectively it can protect its Iran policy.

In conclusion, India's Iran policy is based on strategic autonomy because India must protect its own interests in a complex region. In elevated language, strategic autonomy is the *sovereign method through which India balances Iran, the West, Israel, the Gulf, Russia and China without surrendering its national compass*.

22.3 Final Observation

The final observation of this book is that India–Iran relations are a classic case of geopolitical balancing in a multipolar world. The relationship is sustained by history and geography but constrained by sanctions and regional conflict. It is important for India's future because it connects maritime power with continental ambition. It is important for Iran because it offers a major Asian partner beyond Western isolation and Chinese dominance. It is important for Asia because it reflects the emerging pattern of multipolar connectivity.

India–Iran relations must therefore be handled with maturity. Exaggerated expectations will create disappointment; neglect will create strategic loss. India should neither romanticize Iran nor abandon it. Iran should neither overestimate India's ability to defy sanctions nor underestimate India's long-term importance. Both sides must build a practical partnership around Chabahar, trade, education, culture, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, security consultation and regional connectivity.

The future will require implementation. The book has repeatedly shown that India–Iran relations suffer from a gap between promise and delivery. Chabahar must become commercially active. Payment mechanisms must become reliable. Trade must expand beyond symbolism. Academic and cultural exchanges must be strengthened. Security consultations must become regular. Afghanistan and Central Asia must be integrated into connectivity planning.

In the emerging Asian order, India and Iran can contribute to a more connected, multipolar and balanced regional system. But this requires

political will, strategic patience and administrative discipline. The relationship has survived for decades because its foundations are strong. Its future will depend on whether both countries can make those foundations operational.

22.3.1 India–Iran Relations as a Case of Geopolitical Balancing

India–Iran relations are a powerful example of geopolitical balancing. India must balance Iran with the United States, Israel, Gulf Arab states and the wider Western financial system. Iran must balance India with China, Russia, Pakistan and its own anti-Western posture. Neither country can fully align with the other, yet both need each other. This creates a relationship of *managed convergence*.

India's balancing is especially difficult because its interests are spread across rival actors. The United States is important for technology and defence. Israel is important for security and innovation. Gulf states are important for energy and diaspora. Iran is important for connectivity and Central Asia. Russia remains important for defence and Eurasian diplomacy. China is a competitor but also a major regional reality. India must manage all these relationships simultaneously.

Iran's balancing is also complex. It seeks relief from sanctions, support from China and Russia, regional influence, survival under pressure, and diversified partnerships. India can be useful to Iran, but Iran also depends heavily on China and Russia under sanctions. Tehran must balance its need for India with its other strategic compulsions.

This balancing makes the relationship difficult but not impossible. India and Iran can cooperate where interests overlap and manage differences elsewhere. This is the logic of issue-based diplomacy. Chabahar, Afghanistan, Central Asia, pharmaceuticals, food trade, cultural diplomacy and selected security consultations are areas of convergence. Israel, U.S. sanctions, nuclear issues, Pakistan and China are areas of complexity.

Geopolitical balancing requires disciplined language. India should avoid rhetoric that alienates Iran unnecessarily, but it must also avoid language that damages relations with Israel, Gulf states or the West. Iran should avoid expecting India to behave like an anti-Western ally. Both sides must understand that partnership does not mean total alignment.

In conclusion, India–Iran relations are a case of geopolitical balancing because they exist between competing powers, corridors and conflicts. In refined language, they represent the *diplomatic art of preserving strategic convergence amid structural divergence*.

22.3.2 Future Importance of India–Iran Partnership

The future importance of the India–Iran partnership will increase if Asian connectivity, energy security, Central Asian trade, Afghanistan stabilization and multipolar diplomacy become more important. Iran’s geography will not lose relevance. India’s need for westward access will not disappear. Pakistan’s transit obstruction will not vanish easily. China’s corridor presence will continue. Therefore, India–Iran relations will remain strategically important.

The partnership’s future importance will be greatest in connectivity. Chabahar and INSTC can provide India with routes to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe-linked markets. If these corridors become operational, India–Iran relations can move from symbolic importance to commercial significance. Connectivity is the future foundation.

Energy will remain important. Even if India reduces fossil-fuel dependence over time, oil and gas will remain part of its energy mix for decades. Iran’s resources and location near Hormuz make it relevant. Energy cooperation may revive if sanctions ease. Fertilizers, petrochemicals and gas-based industries may also become important.

Security cooperation will also matter. Terrorism, extremism, narcotics, maritime threats and Afghanistan instability will continue to affect both countries. India and Iran can cooperate selectively without becoming military allies. This is a realistic and useful security future.

Cultural and educational partnership will remain important. Persian studies, Indian studies, Sufi heritage, Shia cultural connections, Parsi history, tourism, cinema, language promotion and university cooperation can sustain the human foundation of relations. Culture gives durability to diplomacy.

The future partnership will also matter because of China. India cannot allow China to become the only major Asian power with strong influence in Iran. Iran also benefits from diversified Asian relations. India–Iran cooperation can help both sides avoid excessive dependence on any single great power.

In conclusion, the future importance of India–Iran partnership lies in connectivity, energy, security, culture and Asian balance. In elevated language, the partnership is a *future-oriented strategic necessity through which India and Iran can convert geography into influence and history into policy relevance*.

22.3.3 India, Iran and the Emerging Asian Order

India, Iran and the emerging Asian order form the final theme of this book. Asia is changing rapidly. China is rising; India is emerging as a major power; Russia is turning more toward Asia; Gulf states are diversifying; Central Asia is seeking multiple routes; Iran is entering SCO and BRICS; the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia are becoming connected strategic theatres. In this environment, India–Iran relations acquire wider significance.

The emerging Asian order will not be shaped by one power alone. It will be shaped by multiple centres: India, China, Japan, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Gulf states, ASEAN and Central Asian republics. Connectivity corridors will become instruments of influence. Ports, railways, pipelines, digital networks, trade routes and financial systems will shape geopolitics. Chabahar is part of this larger corridor politics.

India's role in the emerging Asian order will depend on its ability to connect eastward and westward. India's Indo-Pacific policy gives it an eastern maritime orientation. Iran and Chabahar give it a western continental orientation. A major power cannot look only in one direction. India's rise requires a *two-ocean and two-continent imagination*: the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, South Asia and Eurasia. Iran helps India connect to the western side of this vision.

Iran's role in the emerging Asian order will depend on whether it can overcome isolation, diversify partnerships and use its geography constructively. Iran can be a corridor state, energy state, cultural power and regional actor. But if it remains trapped in sanctions, confrontation and excessive dependence on limited partners, its potential will remain constrained. India can support Iran's constructive regional role through connectivity, trade and dialogue.

The India–Iran partnership can contribute to a more multipolar Asia. It can provide Afghanistan and Central Asia alternative routes, reduce Pakistan's transit monopoly, balance China's corridor dominance, and support regional

trade. It can also show that Asian cooperation need not be based only on military alliances or ideological blocs. It can be based on *connectivity, civilizational respect and pragmatic national interest*.

However, the emerging Asian order will also test India–Iran relations. China’s influence, U.S. sanctions, Iran–Israel conflict, Gulf rivalries, Afghanistan instability and maritime risks will continue. The relationship will require caution. Asia’s future will be multipolar, but not automatically peaceful. Multipolarity without rules can become competition. India and Iran must therefore support stability, not only autonomy.

In conclusion, India, Iran and the emerging Asian order are linked by geography, history and strategic necessity. India needs Iran for westward connectivity; Iran needs India for diversified Asian engagement; Asia needs multiple corridors and balanced partnerships. In refined geopolitical language, India–Iran relations are a *civilizationally rooted and strategically charged axis within the emerging Asian order, capable of shaping connectivity, balance and regional autonomy if disciplined by realism and implemented with seriousness*.

Final Concluding Statement

India–Iran relations since 1947 reveal the complexity of modern diplomacy in a historically connected but geopolitically divided world. The relationship has moved from limited Cold War engagement to post-Cold War convergence, from energy partnership to sanctions-constrained trade, from cultural affinity to corridor diplomacy, and from bilateral friendship to regional strategic importance. Iran remains a gateway for India; Chabahar remains the core of connectivity; sanctions remain the major obstacle; Afghanistan, Pakistan and China shape the regional context; and India’s policy remains guided by strategic autonomy.

The final lesson of this book is that India–Iran relations are too important to neglect and too complicated to romanticize. They require patience, realism, institutional continuity and practical implementation. The future of the relationship will depend on whether India and Iran can protect Chabahar, expand permissible trade, create reliable payment systems, consult on Afghanistan, manage sanctions, balance external pressures and sustain cultural goodwill.

In the grand landscape of Asian geopolitics, India and Iran stand as two ancient civilizations facing modern strategic tests. Their partnership will not be easy, but it will remain consequential. If handled wisely, India–Iran relations can become a model of *geopolitical balancing, civilizational diplomacy and strategic autonomy* in the emerging Asian order.

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