

The Trilateral Impasse: The Strategic Rivalry and Complex Interplay of Pakistan, India and Iran

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The trilateral relationship among Pakistan, India, and Iran exemplifies the complex geopolitical manoeuvring that shapes the regional strategic landscape. This paper analyses how regional security dynamics within one context can destabilize others and influence mutual perceptions, thereby complicating this triangular relationship. Each nation is prompted to reassess its strategies and alliances. The interplay of converging and diverging factors defines this relationship: India's pursuit of regional dominance and external balancing, Iran's need for internal stability, the ideological rift with Pakistan, and Pakistan's proactive engagement in regional affairs serve as key catalysts. Recent tensions, such as India-Pakistan escalations and Iran's conflict with Israel, have altered regional dynamics. This shift provides Pakistan with a strategic opportunity to align with Iran, potentially counterbalancing India's influence in the region.

Keywords: India-Iran nexus, Pakistan relations with Iran & India, foreign policy, South Asia.

The geopolitical landscape of South and West Asia is significantly influenced by the complex and often contradictory relationships between India, Iran, and Pakistan. These neighboring nations weave a tapestry of shared objectives, deep-rooted rivalries, and strategic maneuvers that affect both regional stability and global power dynamics. Their interactions involve a delicate balancing act, shaped by historical legacies, economic dependencies, security concerns, and evolving diplomatic relationships with external powers.

Today, relationships between states and societies are categorized by a captivating combination of cooperation, competition, and even rivalries. Initially, India had no strong relations with Iran. However, these ties were strengthened by Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's landmark visit to Iran in 1993, marking the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister since the 1979 Revolution. India's expanding economy and strategic goals have driven its engagement with Iran, notably through projects such as the Chabahar Port. Moreover, Iran values India as a major energy market and a potential partner in regional connectivity, as reflected in its strong interest in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). India has allied with Iran to strengthen its regional position and to counterbalance Pakistan's influence. Conversely, Iran views India as a valuable economic, political, and strategic partner to meet its domestic needs and enhance trade, especially as it faces diplomatic isolation in regional and global affairs since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. At the same time, Iran seeks to sustain its longstanding, albeit sometimes complex, relationship with Pakistan.

It is important to mention here that Pakistan's relationship with Iran has always been a complicated balancing act. The reasons for the complications include: a long border; mutual interests in regional stability and counter-terrorism, particularly with a focus on cross-border militancy in Baluchistan; sectarian tensions; and Pakistan's strong ties with Saudi Arabia and America, which often create friction. Additionally, the alleged support for opposing proxies in Afghanistan and cross-border terrorism in Baluchistan are some of the high-order concerns that further complicate the security cooperation mechanism between the two neighbouring countries. More concerning for Pakistan is Iran's initiative with India, such as Chabahar Port, to undermine the geostrategic importance of Gwadar Port. These factors helped India and Iran to strengthen their bonds and cement their nexus. Despite divergent state ideologies, political systems, and worldviews, India and Iran have remained allies at least in the recent past. On the other hand, despite historical and religious affinities between Iran and Pakistan, both nations have taken different routes and stayed on divergent pages in regional affairs.

Keeping the backdrop in view, this study aims to unravel the historical nexus between India and Iran, its negative influence on Pakistan, and how it complicates this triangular relationship, prompting each nation to re-examine its strategies and alliances. To achieve this goal, this paper addresses the following important questions: Why is there a strong nexus between India and Iran despite the prevalence of historic and religious ties between Iran and Pakistan? and, how does this nexus between Indian and Iran affect Pakistan's interests?

This study is important because it explores the complex historical and geopolitical connections among India, Iran, and Pakistan—three key states whose relationships have significantly shaped the region's political and strategic landscape. By examining the historical nexus and its subsequent influence on Pakistan, this research offers deeper insights into the roots of diplomatic alignments and regional tensions. Practically, the insights derived from this study can inform policymakers, diplomats, and strategic analysts in understanding the evolving dynamics of regional alliances and rivalries within the India-Iran-Pakistan triangle. Despite its critical importance for regional peace and global geopolitical stability, this triangular impasse is rarely a central focus of academic research. Furthermore, this study lays a foundation for identifying pathways toward regional harmony, rapprochement, cooperation, and joint action.

Theoretical Framework

Despite a few hiccups in the recent past, the partnership between New Delhi and Tehran has expanded smoothly in the realms of business, trade, energy, defence, communication, and regional developments. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), in particular, helps to explain the patterns of divergence and convergence among the three states in the region, shedding light on their security dynamics and interdependence. It provides a framework for understanding the behaviour of states within the international system and their interactions with other countries. The RSCT, as developed by Barry Buzan but later expanded upon by Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde in the Copenhagen School of security studies, is a paradigmatic shift in the way in which thinkers inside the field of international relations put the regional level of security analysis to the forefront as analytically generative and politically significant (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998). It is not only that this theoretical framework throws light on the interdependent textures of friendship and enmity in particular geopolitical geographies, but also sets out an essential window through which the chain reaction of local conflicts in a global strategic balance can be investigated (Buzan, 2003).

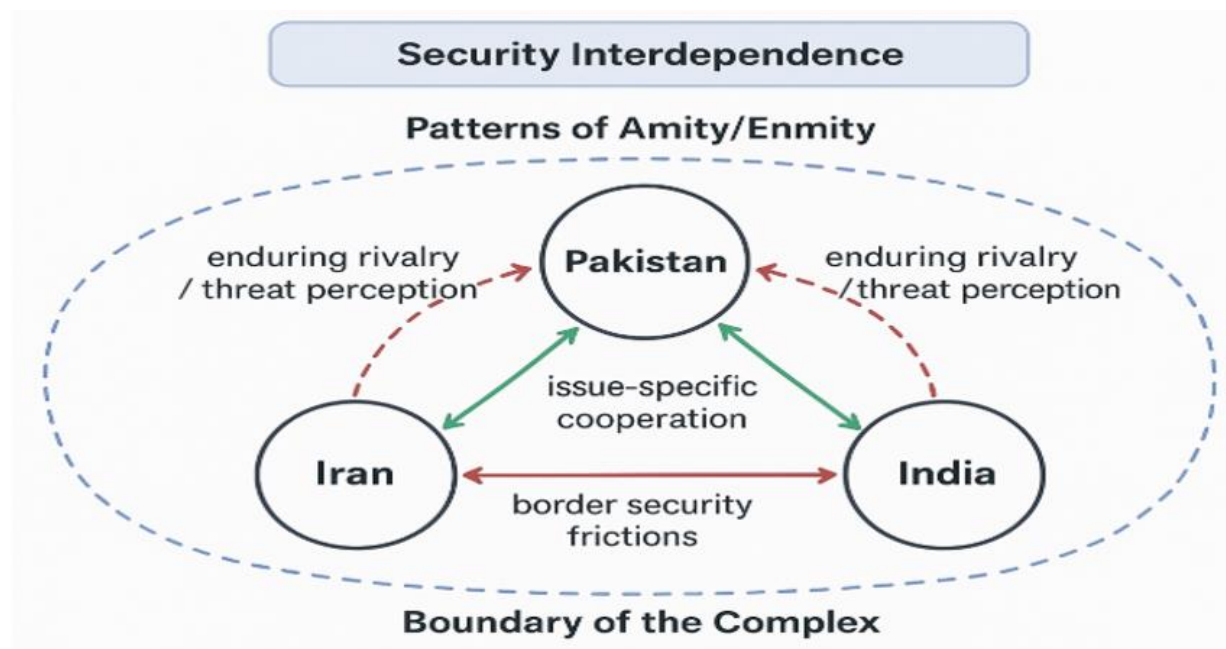
In essence, the notion of RSCT is based on the assumption that security interdependence poses the greatest strength when it is borne on states with closeness to each other (Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010). A collection of these states constitutes what Buzan calls a Regional Security Complex (RSC) a set of states with such reciprocally interlocked principal security interests that their national securities cannot be fairly discussed outside of each other (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Proximity creates this form of interdependence, so that any conflict or cooperation at the regional level is also bound or contained to that region, unless there is some great outside interference (Buzan, 2003). In turn, RSCT can offer an effective counterargument to the excessively Universalist aspirations of conventional neorealism and liberal institutionalism. Both schools tend to lose the specifics of the neighbourhood arrangement (Buzan, 2003; Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

How threats are socially constructed within a region significantly influences the nature and intensity of security dynamics there (Taureck, 2006). For instance, the securitization of water resources, nuclear doctrines, and cross-border terrorism between India and Pakistan cannot be fully understood without considering their history, contested identities, and spatial proximity.

In addition, RSCT also considers structural hierarchies both within and across regions, utilizing the concepts of insulator and penetrated regions, as well as superpower overlay. For example, South Asia and West Asia are often described as penetrated RSCs due to the consistent, multidimensional interventions of world powers. These are Cold War superpower engagements and modernist U.S., Russian, and Chinese strategic entanglements with Pakistan, India, and Iran. The other major strength of RSCT is its policy relevance. It offers a more nuanced map of security relations that spans artificial Westphalian borders, providing insight for decision-makers and analysts.

The 'enigma' of India, Pakistan, and Iran arises from inter-regional dynamics and the ways in which the dominant security complex—India-Pakistan—is influenced by Iran, creating a complex web of overlapping security and cooperation challenges. While India and Pakistan are engaged in an enduring rivalry within the South Asian security complex, Iran functions as an 'insulating' nation, geographically bridging the Persian Gulf/Middle East, Central Asian, and South Asian security complexes. This means that Iran's security interests are shaped by its Western neighbours, yet its growing economic interests with India (e.g., Chabahar Port) is considered by Pakistan as an encirclement policy creating a complex web of mutual suspicion and indirect competition with each other, thereby demonstrating how regional security dynamics in one complex can dominantly destabilize and influence each other (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Pakistan-India-Iran Trilateral Impasse



Method

The secondary data for this research was collected through a qualitative methodology. It includes a diverse range of reports, articles, historical records, geopolitical histories, books, and policy papers. This study is guided by an interpretive epistemology. Qualitative research adopts an inductive approach, beginning with the formulation of research questions and the collection of data. Through analysis, interpretations emerge from the data itself, rather than being driven by predefined hypotheses at the outset of the study. This approach is more workable for analysing social and political issues and perspectives, and grasps a real understanding of particular geographical contexts, especially in secondary data analysis (Bryman, 2008). This study's analysis includes: reviewing data collected from various sources, assigning meaning (coding), classifying data into basic themes, identifying emerging patterns, assessing the applicability of the findings to the questions posed in the study, and ultimately writing up the findings and interpretations (Peterson, 2017).

The Rationale behind the Growing India-Iran Nexus

Several rationales and deep-rooted historical reasons exist behind the India-Iran nexus. Since 1993, both nations have overcome past differences and established strong relations, driven by shared national objectives. Being an Islamic country, Pakistan follows the policy of good relations with all Muslim countries. Iran was the first country to recognise Pakistan as a sovereign state in 1947, and Raza Shah Pehlevi was also the first head of state from a foreign country to visit Pakistan. In 1950, Shah noted, "What could be more natural than the love between two nations that are neighbours and profess the same faith? Iran will never forget the affectionate regard and sincere feelings of this sister and co-religion nation" (Ramana, 2012). Even the Shah of Iran once said in the context of the Pakistan-India 1965 war that it would not accept any attempt to liquidate Pakistan (Choudhary, 1974). All of these show that they enjoyed good relations from the beginning, but later their relations became strained for several reasons. Those reasons have paved the way for the growing nexus between Iran and India.

In modern Iranian history, the 1979 revolution is an important event that has influenced both the country's internal politics and its external affairs with the rest of the world. It is important to note that Pakistan was also the first country to recognise the new government of Iran established after the 1979 Islamic/Khomeini revolution (Belal, 2017). The USSR's attack on Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution in 1979 complicated the relationship between Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan became a frontline ally of the Cold War troika of (Pakistan, the US and Saudi Arabia) and played a crucial role in the Afghan resistance against the USSR. Pakistan's closer alignment with Cold War allies created a significant rift with Iran. This was further exacerbated by the mushroom growth of Saudi-funded Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan. Consequently,

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Pakistan became a site for the testing of regional rivalries by supporting hard-line Shia and Sunni ideologies. The trend that emerged in regional politics, particularly after the USSR invaded Afghanistan, led to the alignment of India's and Iran's regional policies.

The rise of the Taliban due to the fall of the USSR further complicated the regional dynamic. Pakistan's support for the Taliban and Iran's backing of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance created a rift, prompting Iran to forge a closer relationship with India, a fellow supporter of the Northern Alliance. In the 1990s, Iran and Taliban relations were primarily hostile due to the killing of thousands of Taliban fighters by Shia and Northern Alliance forces, and then the retaliatory persecution of the Shia Hazara minority in Afghanistan. Additionally, in 1998, Iran responded to the murders of its diplomats and a journalist in Afghanistan by threatening war against the Taliban by mobilising its troops near the Afghan border. Third, Iran's tilt toward India has been influenced by its policy of "looking East" (Roshandel, 2004). Fifth, energy security is another factor in India-Iran's growing nexus. India seeks affordable energy, while Iran looks for new markets to export its energy resources.

Pakistan and India are two neighbouring South Asian countries with a long history of coexistence and significant potential for improved relations, particularly in trade and economic ties. However, geopolitics has heavily influenced their relationship, even affecting their Most Favoured Nation status for each other. Due to these geopolitical tensions, their relations have not developed smoothly; instead, both countries have sought regional allies to counterbalance each other's interests.

Historical Overview of India-Iran Bilateral Engagement

The India-Iran relationship is multi-dimensional and offers a variety of opportunities to both countries in key areas. Their partnership has become increasingly important as regional dynamics have changed. Since 1950, when they signed the Treaty of Friendship and Perpetual Peace, they have enjoyed good relations. In contrast, Pakistan and India have had intense relations since their independence in 1947. Iran is very important to India from the geopolitical, geo-strategic, and geo-economic perspectives. Its policy toward Iran has been influenced by different strategic and economic interests. Their ties were initially bolstered by the visit of Indian PM Rao to Iran in 1993, the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Tehran since the 1979 Revolution. His visit was followed by a reciprocal visit by Iranian President Rafsanjani in 1995 (Fair, 2010).

Since then, their relations have become multidimensional and strengthened in different areas, particularly in energy, trade, and diplomacy. Moreover, the most significant milestones in Indo-Iranian relations occurred in 2001, when Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Tehran, followed by Iranian President Khatami's reciprocal visit to New Delhi in 2003, being the guest of honour at India's Republic Day celebrations, an honour reserved for India's closest friends (Berlin, 2014). Following the New Delhi Declaration of 2003, Iran and India referred to each other as "strategic allies" and began conducting joint military and naval exercises to demonstrate their solidarity.

Iran is a significant regional economic partner of India. Trade and energy security are the two most important sectors in which bilateral cooperation has significantly increased. The main exports of India to Iran are sugar, rice, fruits, tea, medicines, manufactured fibers, electrical equipment, and artificial jewellery, while the main exports of Iran to India include dry fruits, organic and inorganic chemicals, glassware and glass, pearls, gemstones, gypsum, and leather (Table 1). Recently, both countries agreed to trade in Indian rupees. Oil and gasoline imports from Iran to India totalled \$12.3 billion (Sen, 2020).

Table 1

India-Iran Year-wise Trade (US\$ Million)

Year	Export	Imports	Total
2015	3126.8	6225.32	9352.18
2016	2412.5	8253.7	10666.2
2017	2596.8	11089.4	13686.2
2018	2845.3	14730.8	17576.2
2019	3855	3375.4	7230.4
2020	2243.7	297.12	2540.8
2021	1284	408.6	1692.6
2022	1839.5	653.6	2493.12
2023	1660	672.12	2332.12
2024	1680	520	2300

Source: Author's illustration from the World Bank Database 'World Integrated Trade Solution'.

New Delhi has also invested in other projects in Iran, including the 840-megawatt thermal power plant, the sugar and fertiliser sectors, cement industry, and Abadan oil refinery. More than 8,000 Iranian students are enrolled in various

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disciplines at Indian educational institutions. It offers 67 scholarships each year to Iranian students in different subjects (Usman, 2018).

For India, Iran serves as a gateway to Central Asia and Afghanistan. To further expand its trade and economic relations with Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, India is developing the Chabahar port, and worked on Chabahar-Zaranj railway line in Afghanistan. The 218-kilometer Zaranj-Delaram road connects Iran and Afghanistan, facilitating direct connectivity of Central Asia with the sea, providing an alternative route that bypasses Pakistan.

Ramifications of India-Iran Nexus for Pakistan

Historically, Iran and Pakistan maintained amicable and cooperative relations. However, a combination of evolving strategic interests, changing policy priorities, and alignment with opposing regional actors has contributed to divergence in their bilateral engagement. These shifts have created space for the expanding India-Iran relationship. Iran is increasingly viewed as a potential strategic partner by India. Given the pragmatic approach of both Delhi and Tehran and the broad range of interests their partnership advances, it is likely that their relationship will continue to deepen. The growing Indo-Iranian alliance has significantly influenced key regional issues, including energy, trade, and political developments in the region. Despite ongoing external geopolitical challenges, India's and Iran's shared interests, particularly in regional connectivity, remain strong, underscoring the resilience of their partnership.

As a result, Pakistan's interests are undermined, and the country is pushed into isolation in regional affairs. Partnership with Iran benefits India by providing it with a regional partner that counterbalances Pakistan. It is believed that Tajikistan, a Persian-speaking nation, was persuaded to provide its Farkhor airbase to New Delhi because of Indo-Iranian collaboration (Khan, 2011). The example exemplifies how India has benefited strategically from its relations with Iran. It gave India an edge over Pakistan in Central Asia. Likewise, their security ties had strengthened considerably since Iranian President Khatami's official visit to India as the guest of honour at India's National Day. The two countries reached an agreement that allowed Iran to use Indian military technologies. It also allowed India access to Iranian bases. The first Indo-Iranian joint naval drill is another recent development (Sen, 2020). Iran has also supported India's bid for permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

It is also evident that a prominent challenge in Pakistan-Iran relations stems from Pakistan's security concerns regarding the alleged use of Iranian territory by India. The case of Kulbhushan Jadhav, brought these concerns to the forefront. Pakistani authorities contended that this incident revealed a sequence of Indian intelligence allegedly using Iranian soil to facilitate infiltration and support militant activities within Pakistan. While acknowledging that Iran is not directly involved in sponsoring such activities, the case generated unease in Pakistan regarding the potential use of Iranian soil by external actors.

Iran holds 1,183 trillion cubic feet of gas, the world's second-largest (17.3%) reservoir (Worldometer). India imports a substantial amount of energy resources from Iran. This is further underscored by their recent deal to supply India with 5 million tonnes of liquefied gas annually for the next 25 years (Sen, 2020). The IPI gas pipeline, which later became the IP gas pipeline after India withdrew from the project due to regional geopolitics. This joint gas pipeline was considered a confidence-building measure between two traditional rivals, Pakistan and India; however, it did not proceed. New Delhi believed that this pipeline would give Islamabad a decisive level of leverage over its energy security. The Iranian authorities had received assurances from the then-Pakistani President Musharraf that his country would ensure the pipeline's security and safe transit through Pakistani territory (Pachauri, 2003). Iran also promised to compensate India through LPG if Pakistan stopped supplying it (Naaz, 2001). However, the promise could not work. It is worth noting that, prior to the concept of the IP pipeline, India and Iran had planned to develop an underwater pipeline to be built by the Russian Energy Giant Gazprom. For this purpose, negotiations have continued since 1993. However, the project's high costs led them to adopt an overland route through Pakistan, which gave rise to the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (Ramana, 2012).

Trade and economic cooperation lead to the development and prosperity of states; therefore, India is trying to establish good trade relations not only with Iran but also through Iranian ports with Afghanistan and Central Asia. By doing so, one of India's main objectives is to marginalise Pakistan from the regional trade and economic relations arena. For this purpose, India has also constructed roads in Afghanistan, such as the Delaram-Zaranj Highway, to connect Afghanistan with the Chabahar port. It bypasses Pakistan to connect Afghanistan with the international market.

Ports and sea routes have always been of great importance in the context of the world economy and international trade. Through its investment in the Chabahar Port, India is seeking to provide an alternative port facility for Afghanistan and the Central Asia to reduce their dependency on Pakistani ports (Figure 2), effectively circumventing Pakistan. Gwadar Port is strategically important as it serves as a gateway to the Strait of Hormuz, a vital passage connecting the oil-rich Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea. As a regional transit trade hub, its development has annoyed India (Malik, 2012). The

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main goal of Indian investment in the development of Chahbahar port is to develop a competitor to Gwadar port, reduce its significance, and reduce the reliance of regional nations for their trade over it. Geo-strategically, Iran is crucial to India because it offers an alternative gateway to Central Asia and Afghanistan. For international trade between Afghanistan and Central Asia, Pakistani ports are very cost-effective because they are close, but they are affected by a number of internal and external factors.

Figure 2: Map showing the importance of Gwadar Port vs Chabahar Port



Source: Pmfias.com

India aims to diminish the scope of the Gwadar port. The recent statement of the Shipping Minister of India, Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal, confirms it. He said, “India is working towards unlocking trade potential with Central Asia through the Chabahar Port” (Sonowal, 2022). Gwadar port is giving these nations greater trade prospects and easier access to the Arabian Sea. However, Iran and India see it as counterproductive to their national interests since it strengthens Pakistan’s geostrategic and geoeconomic position.

In 1995, during the visit of the President of Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, to India, a tripartite agreement to build a North-South Transportation Corridor (Figure 3) was signed by India, Iran, and Russia (Berlin, 2014). He was promoting economic reconstruction and foreign policy after the Iran-Iraq War. It has reduced cargo expenses by 30% and travel time by 40%, contrasting with the traditional route through the Suez Canal (Shukla, 2022). In July 2022, Iran began transiting Russian cargo to India via a new trade route along the INSTC. Iran and Russia are promoting the route as an alternative to Egypt’s Suez Canal (Lucente, 2022). It has connected India, Iran, Russia, and Europe. This project connects the Mumbai port to Europe through the Bandar Abbas port. At present, 13 countries are its members. On the one hand, it bypasses Pakistan; on the other, it reduces the scope of the Gwadar port.

Figure 3: Map Showing the Route of the North-South Transportation Corridor.



Source: Shukla (2022).

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India has made significant investments in the Port and associated rail and road linkages. Since the port's opening, Indian operations have handled more than 2.5 million tonnes of cargo as of 2023. In May 2024, India and Iran signed a 10-year agreement to operate the Chabahar Port, reaffirming their long-term commitment to counterbalance Gwadar Port. From FY 2022–2023's 9,126 TEUs to FY 2023–2024's 64,245 TEUs, container traffic increased 600% (Raghib, 2025). This is the most evident instance of strategic cooperation between Iran and India. Perhaps India's plans to counterbalance the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar through the Chabahar Port project.

Pakistan always needed the support of Muslim countries over the Kashmir dispute with India. It is pertinent to mention here that the Kashmir dispute is the core reason behind Pakistan-India hostility and the leading cause of three major wars (1948, 1965, and 1998) and many border skirmishes respectively. Iran was also one of the main supporters of Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. However, as India's relations with Iran improved gradually, the Iranian stance on the Kashmir issue weakened somewhat. Their growing nexus is meant to reduce the support of Iran for the ongoing struggle of the Kashmiri people against Indian occupation. Iran has often helped India defuse international pressure over the Kashmir issue. During a UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) meeting in Geneva in 1994, Iran displayed its efforts to protect the interests of India while maintaining its good reputation with Pakistan too (Ramana, 2012). Iran was instrumental in convincing Pakistan to withdraw its proposed resolution on Kashmir. It was expected that if the resolution was passed, it would have significantly strengthened Islamabad's claims over Kashmir. Dinesh Singh, India's former foreign minister, travelled to Tehran and received a promise from Rafsanjani, then Iran's president, that Tehran would do all it could to ensure that no harm came to India. Islamabad had to revoke the resolution at Tehran's advice, which it saw as a form of backstabbing on its part (Ramana, 2012).

States manage their security and strategic interests within this international self-help system through alliances and defence agreements with their neighbours. Iran and India have also cooperated in Afghanistan, while "Afghanistan is the strategic depth of Pakistan" (Parkes, 2019). New Delhi and Tehran have joined hands to protect their respective interests in Afghanistan (Khan & Rahman, 2020). It became one of the important areas of collaboration between the two nations. Since the rise of Sunni militant organizations in Afghanistan, the Shia have become a marginalized community in the country (Awan & Shifa, 2025). Iran believes the Sunni extremist elements backed by the Taliban pose a terrifying threat to the Shia. On the other hand, in the past, India regarded the Taliban as a threat to its occupation of Kashmir. However, now India and Iran want to mend their tie with the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the past, both countries backed the Northern Alliance, which was confronting the Taliban in Afghanistan. India's links with Iran supported its desire to avoid Pakistan in its western backyard. India successfully attempted to undermine Pakistan's interests during the US occupation of Afghanistan to draw the country into its sphere of influence (Sohail & Iqbal, 2017). They continue to exploit the crises in Afghanistan and Central Asia to advance their political agenda openly (Khan, Dawar & Khan, 2023). According to Iran's former Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, establishing a representative government in Afghanistan is one of their common objectives (Cheema, 2010).

Despite a strategic partnership between India and Iran, recent developments in international politics have influenced their relationship. For instance, during Israel's aggression on Iran in June 2025, Pakistan expressed support for Iran, and India chose not to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) condemnation of Israel's attacks on Iran. These events have brought Pakistan and Iran closer once again.

Strong cooperation with Iran offers numerous advantages for Pakistan, including economic benefits, energy security, and the potential to help resolve the Afghan issue regionally. It also serves to limit India's influence and engagement in Afghanistan. Additionally, collaboration with Iran can aid Pakistan in addressing its Baloch conflict, as India has been exploiting Iran's territory to manipulate the Baloch insurgency—a long-standing issue, with India supporting Baloch separatists (Kupecz, 2012; Bansal, 2008).

Currently, Iran's nuclear issue has imposed certain limitations on its engagement with India. The differences in the direction and objectives of their relations—namely, Iran's effort to balance the US and India's approach of cooperating with both Iran and the US—have resulted in some restrictions on their partnership (Soltaninejad, 2017). A nuclear deal and reconciliation of Iran with Arab countries will help India move forward and further strengthen its cooperation without the fear of US sanctions and losing out to other friends in the Middle East, like Arab countries and Israel. In the case of a nuclear deal, India will further increase its oil and gas imports from Iran. Iran was supplying about 10% of India's total oil requirements before India ceased purchases due to Western pressure (Agarwal, 2022). It is also pertinent to note that, before the US-led sanctions, India was the second-largest importer of oil from Iran after China (Ashwarya, 2017).

New Delhi has significantly benefited from all these events since it maintains strong ties with Israel, Iran, and the Gulf States. Given that it enjoyed the goodwill of all parties and proved to be a good partner of all these countries, despite the fact that these countries have strained relations with each other. India has avoided bilateral differences in its relations with them, but Pakistan has not, as it has aligned with the Saudi Arabian bloc. Therefore, there are numerous opportunities

for partnership between the two countries. India's proactive diplomatic approach—focused on supporting its allies and neighbours while advancing its national interests—has helped it achieve key foreign policy objectives and has created significant potential for collaboration in its favour.

Conclusion

It can be safely argued that Iran's foreign policy towards India has been shaped by Tehran's "look East" strategy, efforts to break its diplomatic isolation, and the pursuit of potential markets for its energy resources. Conversely, India's policy towards Iran is driven by energy security, access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, alliances against its primary rival, Pakistan, and regional strategic partnerships. In India's regional strategy, Iran holds a critical position, vital for India's energy needs and regional trade, given its geographic location spanning the Strait of Hormuz, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan, and providing access to Central Asia. Moreover, a stable Iran is essential for India's interests in the volatile Middle East and South Asia.

Since 1993, the growing India-Iran relationship has impacted Pakistan's strategic, economic, and political interests in the region, straining Pakistan-Iran relations. This close relationship has enabled India to advance its regional objectives, but has had negative repercussions for Pakistan. It has undermined Pakistan's interests by weakening the Iran-Pakistan (IP) pipeline, limiting the potential of Gwadar port for Afghanistan and Central Asia, eroding Iran's political support for Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, and creating opportunities for India to leverage Iran against Pakistan.

How can Pakistan navigate this dilemma created by the expanding India-Iran nexus? The most viable policy approach for Pakistan is to resolve issues with Iran through dialogue, mutual understanding, and trust-building initiatives. Strengthening Iran's reliance on Pakistan, such as through the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, could help keep Iran neutral or aligned with Pakistan rather than India. Additionally, Pakistan should focus on improving its soft power in Afghanistan and Central Asia by encouraging these countries to align with Pakistan in regional economic partnerships rather than India and by promoting the use of the Gwadar port for their imports and exports rather than Indian-designed routes. A core challenge in the Pakistan-Iran relationship stems from political and religious differences. Iran, predominantly Shia, and Pakistan, with a Sunni-majority population, have a history of tensions rooted in sectarian and religious distinctions. These differences have often translated into political manoeuvring, affecting bilateral diplomacy, trade, and regional alignments. Both Iran and Pakistan, as Muslim states, should work to reduce sectarian tensions, foster mutual understanding, and resolve their disputes. The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) could play a pivotal role in normalizing relations between the two countries. Recognizing this, India actively works to curb ECO's influence, seeking to limit the emergence of a unified Muslim economic and political bloc in the region.

At the core of this complex web is the persistent rivalry between India and Pakistan, which drives regional dynamics and influences the actions of other actors. Iran, a key stakeholder in the Middle East, also plays an influential role within the South Asian security complex. Essentially, the RSCT affirms that the security of India, Pakistan, and Iran is interconnected, with the actions of one country reverberating through the others, shaping their strategic decision-making in a single, interdependent system.

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