

Indo-Iran Relations: Challenges and Constraints

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Abstract

India and Iran share long-lasting legacies of cultural, linguistic and religious links for centuries. Relations between them have been deepening with respect to the most issues, especially security, energy and transportation. The relations between the two have seen twists and turns in history where they have been close at times and share common interests. Iran holds a particular importance for India as it provides unique access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, but at the same time there are several constraints that restrict India's reach into Iran. This article examines the key areas on which both countries can cooperate to strength their relations but at the same time, examines the factors that hinder their relationship.

Keywords: energy, constraints, GCC, IPI, Security

Introduction

The two old civilizations-India and Iran have age old relationship in exchange of thoughts among each other which dated back to the Neolithic period. As a result of this, people of India and Iran share significant cultural, linguistic and ethnic characteristics which resulted in interchanges, borrowings, connections and have influenced each other. The two countries share a common border till 1947 and India after getting independence from British colonial rule have established diplomatic links with Iran on March 15, 1950. Both sides were keen to strength the Bilateral relationship which followed with high level exchange of visits from time to time. Many Declarations and Agreements have been signed between the two to strength the relationship, the most important among them is "Tehran Declaration-2001" and "New Delhi Declaration-2003" according to which both New Delhi and Tehran sought to promote peace and friendship, people to people contact and to solve the mutual differences through negotiations. From time to time international environment puts twists and turns, ups and downs in their relations and hamper the progress of friendship between the two nations.

Objectives

1. To examine and highlight the bilateral relationship covering major Treaties and Agreements between the two.
2. To highlight the major potential areas of conflict which hamper the progress of relationship between India and Iran?

Methodology

For the purpose of study both published and unpublished secondary data has been utilized. The data on Indo-Iran relations: Challenges and Constraints were also analyzed. The data is collected from various Journals of Political science, Books and Articles.

DISSCUSSION

India and Iran –The two Asian states have been in constant interaction which has influenced the evolution of Indo-Iranian relations and cultures. From time to time, the leaders of two states paid official visits to exchange views on global and regional developments. The signing of Friendship Treaty with Iran in March 1950 did not brought much closeness and friendship in their relations because of several factors like Iran's entry into the Central Treaty Organization(CENTO),Iran's stand on the Kashmir issue and support to the Pakistan brought bitterness in their in their relations(1). Despite the different perceptions on a number of issues, since 1947 most Prime Ministers and other prominent leaders have underlined the strategic importance of Indo-Iranian ties like Jawaharlal Nehru who worked hard to establish close ties with Iran when he paid an official visit to Tehran in September 1959(2). The Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, which brought change in the government, India largely, welcomed Iran's revolution as an expression of national self- assertion was followed by a short period of lull in the bilateral relationship. The short period of friendly relations again hampered when Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and India remained ambivalent during Iran-Iraq war as it tried to secure its oil interests in both the countries.

The end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union presented both states new found opportunities. Central Asia became an open field where both states could project their equities and influence in

the area. For this, a new phase of engagement began with the high level visits of official from both the sides. The most important among them is the Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to Tehran in (2001) and President Khatami's visit to New Delhi(2003) which resulted in Tehran Declaration and New Delhi Declaration respectively(4). Tehran declaration brought the two countries closer and resulted in the establishment of India - Iran strategic dialogue to address regional and international security covering the fields of energy and commercial concerns , transportation , agriculture, industry , scientific and technological cooperation etc. likewise the new Delhi declaration gave a robust to indo – Iranian relationship which heavily focused on international terrorism and the promotion of international peace and stability apart from the cooperation in the fields of science and technology , information technology , defense cooperation and training reconstruction of Afghanistan an including oil and gas issues (5) . One of the key instruments signed was the “Road Map to strategic cooperation “Both sides committed to expand non-hydrocarbon bilateral trade and other forms of significant economic cooperation , the joint effort to further develop the Chahbahar port ,fahranj –bam railway link and both are moving to forge institutional defense linkages and have established working groups on terrorism and counter narcotics.

There is tremendous scope for cooperation between India and Iran over the issue of regional security. A secure, stable, peaceful and prosperous neighborhood is central to security contract of both the countries. India and Iran strongly believe that their strengthened bilateral relations will be mutually beneficial and enhance regional peace, security and stability particularly in Afghanistan. Both New Delhi and Tehran has genuine strategic interests in assisting Afghanistan to become a functioning and responsible state in the region. For this both countries have offered support towards major reconstruction projects in Afghanistan and are providing financial assisting to the Afghanistan .Both India and Iran are making effort to fight against the Sunni extreme groups which both states treated as a threat for their security . It is the common interest of India and Iran strongly with all the forms of terrorist activities and to eradicate the terrorism from the region (6).

Both New Delhi and Tehran have a great potential for meaningful cooperation between then in energy, trade and economic sectors. Energy is one of the most important elements in the strategic collaborations between Iran and India. As stated in the New Delhi declaration, energy sector is the key area of their future relationship. India's energy requirements is linked to growing energy supply – demand gap as its domestic production of oil and gas has failed to keep pace with rising consumption needs to meet the requirement India import large quantities of petroleum crude from Iran both by public and private sector .Iran on the other hand , as the major reserve of hydrocarbons is very much interested in the development if India- Pakistan- Iran (IPI) gas pipeline projects as it would enhance regional economic integration and economic prosperity. For that it was the result of signing a document in January 2005 by which Iran will sell 7.5 million tons of LNG a year to India for next 25 years and India will help Iran in extracting 100,000 barrels of oil per day (7).

Challenges and Constraints:

While the interests between India and Iran in closer and more robust ties may have intensified, the same obstacles and limitations that bound them in the past will continue to do so. India will have to find ways of balancing its relations with Iran, while simultaneously managing its deepened relations with the United States, Israel and other states (8).

India became a strategic partner of United States when both states signed an agreement on civil nuclear cooperation in 2005 known as Hyde Act. This hampered the growing Indo-Iranian relationship as Bush Administration made it a condition for India to vote against Iran at the IAEA in 2006 for the approval of Indo-US civilian nuclear Deal in the US Congress. The vote against Iran by India was regarded by Tehran as a turn-around in its approach towards Iran. Iran's reaction was swift and it threatened immediately to cancel the LNG deal struck between the two countries in June 2005. Again in February 2006 India voted against Iran and Iran in its reply went to the extent of refusing permission to India Fighters Jets to fly over its territory to take part in the Red air – combat exerciser in the US in the September 2008. Thus the relationship showed increasing signs of strain as India's relationship with the United states prospered immensely(9). A number of important projects with Indian business and the Indian Govt. have either been rejected by Iran or have yet to be finalized due to the last minute changes in the terms and conditions by Tehran.

The crucial regional issue where India and Iran need each other is the evolving security situation in Afghanistan as both states are involved in reconstruction and rebuilding of Afghanistan and are taking several important projects for the same. The rise of Sunni extreme groups and forces like Taliban would do their best to hinder the progress of these projects. It is imperative for India and Iran to settle Afghan issue amicably and did not want to see the return of Taliban in Kabul which serves as a spring board to project Pakistan's military interest (10).

Another area of conflict among the Indo-Iranian relationship is the Israel's factor. Indo-Israel's bilateral ties is provided by the defense cooperation between the two states, with India's emerging as Israel's largest Arms market and is a major supplier of weapon and equipment too India. Israel accuses Iran of aiding Lebanese

and Palestinian organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas who are in hostility with Israel. Good relations with Israel for India in a way will also help to maintain good relations with the United States. On the other side Iran's aggressive rhetoric towards Israel will circumscribe New Delhi's outreach to Tehran (11).

India's close relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) poses a challenge for Indo-Iranian relationship. GCC was formed in 1981 in response to the Islamic revolution of Iran 1979. The ideological clash between the Iran and the GCC have slowed down the relationship between New Delhi and Tehran as GCC states are the largest trade partners for India and it cannot ignore the importance of GCC states. The future of Indo-Iran relations will depend upon how India manages to balance its relations with Israel, US and the GCC on one hand and Iran on the other (12). The GCC nations are under the security umbrella of the United States, therefore India's engagement with Iran not only antagonizes the GCC but also the United States because the GCC views Iran as a difficult neighbor and threat to their regional stability.

Dream of Pipeline: The idea of pipeline known as the "Peace Pipeline" was a result of signing of MOU with Iran in 1993. It was given a further boost when talks were held between Iran and Pakistan in 1994 for deliver natural gas from Iran to Pakistan and both sides decided to extend the pipeline to India in February 1999. The 2275km land pipeline was supposed to start from Iran to the Balochistan area of Pakistan to reach India at Barmer Rajasthan. The Project known as IPI (Iran-Pakistan-India) pipeline project, appears beneficial for all the concerned parties, however several commercial and political issues have delayed the project. In 2009 India withdrew from the project over pricing and security issues and fears that Pakistan may pull the plug any time, stopping gas supplies to India. However in 2010, India called on Pakistan and Iran for trilateral talks. India wants Iran to be responsible for safe passage of gas through 10, 35 km pipeline in Pakistan and would pay for the fuel only when it is delivered at Indian border which was unacceptable to Iran (13). On the other hand, Washington is opposed to the pipeline as this would bring substantial revenue for Iran which is facing economic sanctions due to its controversial nuclear program. Moreover there is still no agreement between India and Iran on the price of the gas or between India and Pakistan on the tariff to be paid for transportation across latter's territory.

Conclusion

The relations between India and Iran go back to the ancient times. Both the civilizations have influenced each other in the realm of various spheres such as languages, culture, religion, architecture and literature. From time to time there were several high level visits on both sides after the signing of the Treaty of Friendship in 1950. There are many opportunities foreseen owing to India's engagement with Iran and the post cold war witnessed the significant improvements in their bilateral relations. The facts that the Iran is important to India, but there are several constraints that restrict India's reach into Iran. India's desire to have closer ties with the US for nuclear energy and other issues led to the US pressure on India to cut down ties with Iran. Similarly the engagement would be at a very high cost looking at the apprehension expressed by Iran's adversaries i, e the GCC and Israel with whom India's stakes are huge.

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