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Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
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Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

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TITLE:

INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH IRAN AND
GLOBAL STABILITY

AUTHOR:

Major Adarsh Singh Parihar, Indian Army

AY 14-15

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Douglas E. Streusand

Approved: 

Date: 24 April 2015

Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Francis H. Marlo

Approved: 

Date: 24 April 2015

Executive Summary

Title: India's Engagement with Iran and Global Stability.

Author: Major Adarsh Singh Parihar, Indian Army

Thesis: India can work along with the West to make the Iranian program for nuclear enrichment more transparent, engage Iran on regional issues such as the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and impede the establishment of the Russia-China-Iran axis.

Discussion: Historically, India and Iran have had close relations with each other. Despite India's support of UN sanctions against Iran, the relationship between the two countries remains cordial, especially in comparison to the tensions between Iran and the West, the US in particular. The improvement in India's strategic relationship with the US creates an opportunity for India to involve itself in resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis, and to contribute towards regional and global stability. India and Iran share concerns about Afghanistan, especially following the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) withdrawal. The harnessing of shared interests and concerns can encourage Iran's positive engagement in Afghanistan, thereby making Iran a responsible stake holder in the Persian Gulf region. As an emerging global power, India can use its soft power and economic influence to prevent Iran from getting closer to China and Russia, thereby impeding the establishment of a Russia-China-Iran axis. In compliance with the West, India can strengthen its ties with Iran by increasing its economic influence, enhancing diplomatic efforts, and improving people to people contacts between the two nations. This study focuses on finding out how India can engage Iran positively to resolve the nuclear issue, and contribute significantly towards global peace and stability.

Conclusion: India's positive engagement of Iran can help resolve the Iranian nuclear issue and has the possibility of preventing Iran from joining hands with Russia and China. However, a clear understanding has to be made amongst all the players including India, Iran, and the West to ensure that the end result brings more peace and stability globally. At the same time, an active Indian involvement in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue can become a model for India's involvement in other regional and global security issues.

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Preface

As an emerging power, India has the ability to contribute to regional and global stability. In particular, India can contribute to the resolution of the conflict between Iran and the West over the Iranian nuclear program. This paper explains the role India can play in involving itself to persuade Iran to make its nuclear program more transparent, which will help ease tensions between Iran and the West. This paper also analyzes the present circumstances to recommend a strategy that India can adopt to engage Iran positively and bring Iran closer to the West for a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue.

The research for this article was conducted under the guidance and mentorship of Dr. Douglas E. Streusand, Professor of International Relations at the United States Marine Corps Command & Staff College, Quantico, VA. As a mentor, he was instrumental in aligning the academic thoughts of the author required for the article. The faculty at the Leadership Communications Skills Center provided the much needed guidance to formulate an approach for the research of this article. The research was primarily carried out at the Gray Research Center, Marine Corps University, with the assistance and support of the library staff of the research center.

India's Engagement with Iran and Global Stability

India and Iran, having shared cultural and socio-historical affinities, have always enjoyed a close relationship. Even though India has twice voted in favor of sanctions against Iran at meetings of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) board, the relationship between the two countries has remained cordial, especially in comparison to the tensions between Iran and the West, the US in particular. In the last few years, one of the major contentious issues between Iran and the US has been Iran's program of nuclear enrichment for the purpose of the development of nuclear weapons. This Iranian nuclear issue has coincided with the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has made the Gulf region highly unstable. As major regional players, India and Iran can, along with the West, play vital roles in stabilizing the region. However, at present it will be difficult to achieve Iran's cooperative involvement towards regional stability. At the same time, the lack of Western engagement with Iran gives Russia and China the opportunity to establish an axis with Iran against the West, a clear threat to global order. India can work along with the West to make the Iranian program for nuclear enrichment more transparent, engage Iran on regional issues such as the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and impede the establishment of the Russia-China-Iran axis.

India has the potential to engage Iran positively in the Persian Gulf region. In spite of being an emerging global power, India has acted more as a spectator than as an active actor in the ongoing Iranian nuclear issue. The failure of India's leaders to address such strategic issues has raised doubts about the intent and the ability of India to take a global strategic role. The new government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has the opportunity to step in and involve itself in the ongoing global security issues such as the Iranian nuclear issue. India should seize such opportunities. Such involvement will also make India's position clear and create more understanding with the West about those issues that concern global peace and stability.

This paper deals with the role India can play in resolving the ongoing Iranian nuclear issue and explains how the closer relationship between India and Iran can contribute to restoration of regional and global stability. After a brief background about the history of relations between India and Iran and the Iranian nuclear issue, the paper has three main parts. The first part addresses the issue of the role India can play in persuading Iran to make its program for nuclear enrichment more transparent. It will explain the importance of India's credibility with both Iran and the West and its neutrality towards any alliance/ axis. It highlights the possibility of India's inclusion in the P5+1 (five permanent members of the UNSC and Germany) negotiation with Iran to expedite process. The second part of the paper explores the possibility and significance of positive engagement with Iran about regional security architecture, such as cooperation with the West and India on reconstruction of Afghanistan following the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) withdrawal. It highlights the importance of making Iran accountable for its actions on regional security issues, mainly of the Persian Gulf region. The third part of the paper will address India's opportunity to use soft power to impede the establishment of a Russia-China-Iran axis. It will cover the relationship of Iran with Russia and China in the past and the emerging close relationship between Iran and Russia, and Iran and China. It also highlights the role India--as an alternative to Russia and China mainly due to the availability of large Indian market for the Iranian oil--can play in engaging Iran economically and impeding the establishment of the Russia-China-Iran axis. The paper will conclude with recommendations for ways and means that Indian policy makers, in agreement with the West, can adopt to engage Iran.

The arguments made in this paper are based on certain reasoning which is controversial and open to question. The most prominent one is the role of the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei as the ultimate authority in the Iranian regime to make any strategic decisions, particularly related to the Iranian nuclear program. According to the official

philosophy of the Islamic Republic, the supreme leader may terminate any of the government's contracts or agreement, if he sees it as expedient for the regime.¹ This severely undercuts the role of the Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, considered a moderate leader. Though considered a moderate, Hassan Rouhani has failed to deliver on his promises to promote human rights and democracy in Iran. According to Ilan Berman, an expert on regional security in the Middle East, "He [Rouhani] remains a faithful reflection of the repressive ideological regime established by Ayatollah Khomeini 35 years ago."² Rouhani's plan for "constructive engagement" is only intended to ease Iran's international isolation with no real intent to slow or stop the Iranian nuclear program, mainly because he is considered to be very close to Iran's clerical establishment and the role he has played in the past in pushing Iran's nuclear program.³

Another important factor characterizing the Iranian regional policy in the Persian Gulf region is its quest for regional hegemony. According to Michael Singh, managing director of The Washington Institute, "Indeed, following a nuclear deal, Washington and its allies may find themselves facing an Iran that is enriched, empowered, and no less committed to regional hegemony."⁴ This bolstered regional hegemony will directly threaten countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel, which regard Iran as a threat. Such hegemonic intentions of Iran will make it difficult for the Indian initiatives to succeed in engaging Iran for the regional stability. India needs to keep these issues under consideration to ensure the effectiveness of its initiatives in engaging Iran towards regional stability and making it a responsible actor in the region.

Background: Indo-Iran Relations and the Iranian Nuclear Issue

India and Iran enjoy a close relationship due to their cultural, economic, and demographic affinities. The relations between the two nations improved after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, when Iran moved out of the close relationship with the Western powers.⁵

In the Post-Cold War period, there was significant improvement in the relations with the Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao visited Iran in 1993, followed by a return visit of Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani in 1995. The relations between the two nations became more strategic in nature with the Tehran Declaration of 2001 and Delhi Declaration of 2003.⁶ The Tehran Declaration of 2001 solidified mutual economic interests and the Delhi Declaration of 2003 called for enhanced military cooperation, concrete steps on oil and gas projects, commitment to develop Chahbahar Port Complex further, and to broader collaboration between India and Iran on regional issues.⁷

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has more vigorously pursued its nuclear program. In 2002, secrecy of the Iranian nuclear program ended, with the revelations about the progress on sensitive nuclear technologies and the possibility of nuclear enrichment above the limits intended to prevent nuclear weapons production.⁸ Based on IAEA's report on Iran's clandestine nuclear activities, the UN Security Council (UNSC) passed resolutions for the suspension of the Iranian nuclear program. Along with other major nations of the world, including Russia and China, India voted in favor of the resolution. At this time, India and the US entered into a strategic relationship. The Iranian regime reacted sharply, considering India's vote against Iran as a response to US pressure, and threatened to reconsider its economic cooperation with India. Since then, the relationship between India and Iran has been inconsistent. India has tried to follow an independent line of relationship with Iran, unaffected by the steps taken by the West.

Following the successful passage of the UNSC resolution against the Iranian nuclear program, the UN has imposed four successive set of sanctions on Iran since 2006,⁹ which have further damaged relations between Iran and the West. In addition to UN sanctions, the US and the European Union (EU) unilateral economic sanctions, which have crippled the Iranian economy and isolated it from most parts of the world. The economic isolation has led

Iran to seek alliances with countries like India and China. The West's anti-Iranian approach (mainly due to the tension created owing to the policies and actions of the Iranian regime) challenges the Indian policy makers to follow a balanced strategy towards Iran. This challenge to Indian policy makers is mainly because India would like to maintain good relations with Iran without affecting its strategic relations with the West. Therefore, India has taken a cautious approach in continuing its economic relationship with Iran to overcome its energy requirements and at the same time to maintain its strategic relationship with the West.

Why should India maintain good relations with Iran and engage Iran over the stability of the region? The answer lies in the geo-political importance of Iran for India. It provides India an access to Afghanistan and to the Central Asian Republics (CAR)--vital to India's energy security. There is no denying the fact that India's significant strategic and economic stakes in Afghanistan and CAR cannot be fostered without cooperation from Iran, as Pakistan will always deny India land access to those regions.¹⁰ Iran dominates the Strait of Hormuz, and can block the access of the outside world to the Gulf nations in case of conflict between Iran and the West. Iran has been a major oil supplier to India, so India cannot lose Iran as a trading partner to other competing nations, mainly China. With the election of moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani as the new Iranian President, there are hopes that the relations between Iran and the West will improve.¹¹ According to Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, "Rouhani has even called for a discourse of 'prudent moderation,'--which aims to move Iran away from confrontation, towards dialogue and constructive interaction--thereby helping Iran in safeguarding its national security, elevating its stature, and achieving comprehensive development."¹² This political change in Iran provides India, under the dynamic leadership of its newly elected Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi, an opportunity to involve itself along with the West to persuade Iran to make its nuclear program transparent.

India Should Persuade Iran to make its Nuclear Program Transparent

For India's involvement in the Iranian nuclear issue, it is important to understand the dynamics of the countries of the Persian Gulf region and the interests that India have in the outcome of the negotiations between Iran and the West. For many countries in region, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran represents an existential threat even without nuclear weapons.¹³ From Saudi Arabia's point of view, Iran is encircling Saudi Arabia by increasing its influence in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.¹⁴ Any failure of negotiations between Iran and the West over the nuclear issue might further complicate the situation. It would encourage Iranians to be more aggressive in the region. It may lead to Iran taking further hegemonic actions in the region, threatening the stability of countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt, to name a few. Any kind of provocation may lead to Iran perpetrating terrorist attacks against those countries with the help of its proxy terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and so on.¹⁵ Fearing such an eventuality, the affected nations may start initiating a nuclear arms race in the region. Therefore, the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue should ensure that Iran is not able to follow a nuclear enrichment program for weapon production.

As a nuclear power that is increasing its peaceful uses of nuclear energy, India can persuade Iran to fulfil its obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). India can work with the P5+1 towards finalizing a deal that precludes Iran from turning its civil nuclear program into a nuclear weapon program. The West has to realize that people of Iran, as part of an old civilization, will not succumb to the economic pressures, and such pressures will further solidify the resolve of the Iranians. Therefore, India has the opportunity to facilitate a diplomatic solution.

In recent years, India has emerged as a major Asian power, and it is considered an emerging global power. Having achieved this status, India is obliged to use its influence to contribute to global and regional stability. India's strategic ties with the West and cordial

relations with Iran permit India to contribute to resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. Indian involvement also would help in making some progress in the ongoing negotiations between the West and Iran for a more peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

India would benefit from active involvement in the negotiations. The states have their own national interests when they get involved as third party. States that get involved as a third party to resolve the issue may have aims that include reduction of conflict for overall peace and stability in the region; a desire to extend and increase its own influence; to mitigate the conflict's effects on its relations with the disputing parties or with other international actors; reluctance to take sides between the conflicting parties; and so on.¹⁶ India's decision to become actively involved would reflect its national interest in promoting stability in the Gulf region and securing its future energy requirements. At the same time, India would not welcome the emergence of another nuclear power state with the capability to produce nuclear weapons in the region, a region which already has many nuclear power states such as India, China, Pakistan and Israel. Therefore, it will be in India's interest to help the West in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue.

Of late, Indo-Iran relations have become uncertain owing to India's growing closeness with the US and vote against Iran at the IAEA board meeting in 2006. India would like to improve its strategic relationship with the West, especially the US, but not at the cost of energy supplies from Iran. Through an active involvement in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue, India will be able to continue its energy supplies from Iran, and also clarify its position to the West on the Iranian nuclear issue.

On account of India's credibility with both the parties, India's involvement would give more confidence to Iran as well as the US. Iran would be at ease with India's participation because India is not part of any military alliance with the West and the US. India opted not to send a military contingent to Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the coalition

forces. This will remove any Iranian inhibitions about involving another party in the negotiation process. India has been following an independent foreign policy and has maintained a balance in its relationship with all the major powers of the world. Because of its independent policies, India is not considered anywhere close to the Russia-China-Iran axis. This assures the West of India's good intentions.

India can either join the existing P5+1 negotiation with Iran or attempt to establish a separate three way dialogue with Iran and the US. Though a non-signatory of the NPT, India has shown to the world its responsible attitude over its nuclear program, and therefore can significantly contribute to reach a solution to the issue.

India has been constantly presenting its case in various forums for inclusion as a permanent member in a reorganized and restructured UNSC.¹⁷ Successful participation in the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue would show the global standing that India has achieved as a facilitator of peace and stability at the global stage. The P5+1 have been negotiating with Iran since 2006.¹⁸ The six nations want Iran to scale back its nuclear program in return for lifting the economic and financial sanctions. In Nov 2013, P5+1 negotiations with Iran seemed to be heading in the right direction with a six-month deal, as both the parties agreed to halt Iran's sensitive nuclear activities along with increased international monitoring and in return provide some sanction relief to Iran.¹⁹ In Nov 2014, P5+1 extended the negotiation deadline by another by seven months.²⁰ However, the P5+1 and Iran in April 2015 reached a "framework agreement" to reduce Iran's enrichment capability with enhanced IAEA inspection of Iran's nuclear facilities in return for sanction relief.²¹ The April 2015 agreement is a positive development, but still there is a long way to go to seal a final deal. India's intervention in the negotiations would facilitate final resolution.

In order to join the negotiations, India must persuade the participants that India's inclusion would be helpful. Once included, India needs to contribute actively to the process.

Indian involvement in the Iranian nuclear issue can become a model for India's policy options in other regional and global security issues. India also can engage Iran in the regional security architecture, mainly on issues of common concerns in the Persian Gulf region such as reconstruction of Afghanistan. On the Afghanistan issue, both India and Iran have stakes in the country's stability and security.²²

Indian Engagement of Iran on Issues of Regional Stability

It is important to understand the importance that Iran's foreign policy makers place on the issues related to the security and stability of the Persian Gulf region. It is evident that Iran's regional influence has increased manifold since 9/11 and the Iraqi crisis of 2003. These incidents led to Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. These events presented ideal opportunities to the US to resolve various strategic issues with Iran and cooperate to achieve regional stability in Persian Gulf region. However, the Iranian repressive regime and its ongoing Iranian nuclear issue have precluded both nations from cooperating in Afghanistan and Iraq.

If dialogues, interaction, and positive engagement are the best way to find a solution to the nuclear issue, then the regional security issues, mainly in the Persian Gulf region, provide ideal opportunities to make Iran accountable for the peace and stability in the region. According to Dr. Kayhan Barzegar, Director of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies (IMESS) in Tehran, "The sources of Iran's national power including a powerful nation-state, geo-political situation, and dynamic Shiite ideology are such that they afford Iran a prominent role in the region."²³ With the quest for maintaining influence in the Persian Gulf region, Iran would like to develop relations with other nations of the region with which it shares common interests and concerns. Afghanistan's stability is one such issue over which India and Iran share common concerns and interests.

The major impediment in Iran-inclusive regional security architecture is the current state of strained relationship between Iran and the US. The solution lies in the ongoing diplomatic efforts, improving relations to ensure better understanding, and creating opportunities to reach amenable solutions such as agreeing on a transparent nuclear program for peaceful purposes. It would further allow Iran and the US to cooperate on other regional security issues. The improved US-Iran relationship will create more opportunities for the Iranian engagement in the Persian Gulf region. It will also create an opening for Indian engagement of Iran in ensuring Afghanistan's stability.

India and Iran have stakes in ensuring the stability of Afghanistan. Both India and Iran would like to see a more stable Afghanistan, especially post-ISAF withdrawal. As the coalition forces reduce their presence in Afghanistan, they may create a security vacuum in Afghanistan. Extremist forces such as the Taliban, bolstered by Pakistan's support, may try to regain their presence. This would have far reaching implications for India and Iran. Keeping those implications in mind, both the nations should cooperate and evolve strategies to assist in the rebuilding of Afghanistan to include building infrastructure for connectivity in Afghanistan, creating infrastructure for schools and education, medical facilities, information sharing, and training of Afghan security forces. Both nations need to cooperate on Afghanistan to prevent the Taliban's revival in Afghanistan.

In the late 1990s both nations had supported the Northern alliance, a military front comprised of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Pashtuns, against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.²⁴ Currently, both countries share similar concerns about the role of Pakistan in promoting anti-India and anti-Shia terror outfits, and supporting the Taliban.²⁵

Pakistan backed Taliban militants have been carrying out attacks on Indian targets in Afghanistan in order to force India to curb its development activities and restrict India's growing influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan perceives Indian investments in Afghanistan as

part of its grand strategy of encircling Pakistan. Iran considers the Pakistan-backed Taliban as a threat. Ideologically, Taliban has antagonistic views towards Shi'ites, and from security perspective it propagates religious extremism. Iran, like India, doesn't want the Taliban to regain control of Afghanistan administration. Apart from these shared concerns and interests, India and Iran have their own interests in promoting stability in Afghanistan. Afghanistan provides India a gateway to Central Asia, where India would like to increase its economic influence.

Among all the regional actors, India has the largest stake in ensuring the stability of Afghanistan. India has pledged approximately \$ 2 billion for the rebuilding of Afghanistan.²⁶ India also has huge investments in the Hajigak iron ore mines. The important infrastructure projects involve 218-kilometer Zaranj-Delaram highway connecting Afghanistan's main highway with the Iranian border, the Salma dam power project in Herat province, construction of the Afghan parliament building, and other smaller projects in agriculture, rural development, education, health, energy, and vocational training.²⁷ India also has been involved in the development of the Chahbahar Port in Iran, which provides only realistic option to access Afghanistan, and further to Central Asia. Therefore, India will always like to see a stable and peaceful Afghanistan under a strong leadership, contrary to what Pakistan wants. India also provides training to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in India to make them capable of maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan, once the ISAF withdraws from Afghan soil.

As a major regional player, Iran has a prominent role to play in the stability of Afghanistan. After the 9/11 incident, Iran supported the ensuing US invasion of Afghanistan in Oct 2001. It also played a constructive role during the Bonn Process that led to framing of Afghanistan's constitution emphasizing democracy and supporting the military invasion.²⁸ Iran would always like to see a more stable Afghanistan, as it shares a 582-mile border to its

east with Afghanistan, and the two neighbors have no unsettled territorial disputes, which is a rarity in the region.²⁹ Afghanistan has a significant Shia population, a priority for Iran as Iran considers itself as bastion of the Shi'ite ideology. Iran would not like to see a recurrence of Sunni terrorism from Afghan soil, threatening the Shias in Afghanistan as well as in the eastern Iran. Afghanistan is also the focus point of Iran's "Look to the East" grand strategy, seeking to increase its economic and energy relations with the other Asian countries such as India, China, and Japan.³⁰ Iran has a major role in the North-South corridor--connecting the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea and further to the Russian Federation--which passes through Afghanistan. At the same time, a stable Afghanistan means less US military presence, which would make Iran feel less threatened.

India and Iran need to realize their common interests and address their common concerns in Afghanistan. Both nations have been involved in socio-economic development in Afghanistan. They need to work towards connectivity to and within Afghanistan. They also need to operationalize already existing rail and road links between Iran and Afghanistan through development of the Chahbahar Port in Iran. Improved connectivity can be the first step towards improving the security situation in Afghanistan. It would enhance India's accessibility to different and far flung areas of Afghanistan. It would also help India and Iran to increase their influence in Afghanistan and undercut Pakistan's influence. A transport link from Chahbahar to Afghanistan will also provide the West an alternative to its dependence on Pakistan for a transport link from the Arabian Sea to Afghanistan, which has been subjected to constant threat from anti-ISAF forces. India and Iran can provide training to Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF). Information sharing is another area of cooperation where both nations can use their resources. Both nations can jointly undertake various development projects such as providing medical facilities, infrastructure for school and education, construction of buildings and infrastructure for local administration. They also need to

cooperate in countering narcotics trafficking, the major source of funding for the extremist groups.

India's cooperation with Iran in restoring the stability of Afghanistan will also create opportunities for the West to engage Iran on other regional security issues such as Iraq, Syria, and the ISIS threat in Levant. The current security situation in the Persian Gulf region requires the West's positive Iranian engagement. More importantly, there is requirement of Iran's positive response--leaving aside its use of proxies to destabilize the region and its hegemonic intentions. This will require the West to continue its diplomatic policy of negotiations with Iran and create opportunities for more peaceful and amenable solutions. The discontinuation of current policies might alienate Iran and force it to move closer towards the countries which hold more antagonistic views towards the West and the US such as Russia, China, and North Korea, to mention a few.

India's Engagement with Iran as Impediment to the Establishment of the Russia-China-Iran Axis

Two nations facing animosity with the third nation find comfort in having a friendly relation with each other. This falls in line with the present dynamics of the relationship amongst Russia, China, and Iran with respect to their relationship with the West. However, at present, this relationship is at its formative stage. All three of nations (Russia, China, and Iran) are trying to build confidence amongst them. However, over a period of time this relationship may turn into some kind of alliance (or axis), posing a threat to the West. It may result into a Cold War-like situation. These words may sound big, but they are not a remote possibility. But since this relationship is still at its formative stage and the West can take steps to impede the establishment of this relationship. One of the options to impede the Russia-China-Iran axis is to involve other regional powers such as India to engage with Iran in regional security architecture.

India can use its soft power of economic engagement, people to people contacts, and history of close cordial relationship with Iran to impede the establishment of the Russia-China-Iran axis. India's active involvement with Iran will help Iran overcome its isolation (a core Iranian concern), and prevent Iran from looking towards other powers such as Russia or China for support in the global arena. It is important to understand the dynamics of the developing Russia-China-Iran axis in the contemporary geopolitical context, and why India offers Iran an alternative to alignment with Russia and China.

The history of the Iran-Russia relationship has largely been turbulent and negative. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 made erstwhile Soviet Union suspicious of the true character of the regime. By 1989, the relationship had stabilized, with both nations deciding to improve the bilateral ties. In 1991, the Soviet demise did not bring any good changes for Iran, as by then Iran had developed good relations with Soviet Union and it also created new security threats for Iran with three unstable immediate neighbors, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkmenistan- and more unstable neighbors in South Caucasus and Central Asia.³¹ In 1995, the Iran-Russia relations showed signs of improvement with agreement over construction of Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran with Russian assistance. However, the construction of the nuclear power plant became a contentious issue as Russians couldn't meet the deadline of 1999 for its completion, and they handed over the plant to Iran only in 2013.³² Such defaults in promises have critically challenged Iran's confidence over Russia.

On the Iranian nuclear program, the Russian approach has been very inconsistent and opportunistic. Until 2006, when IAEA referred the Iranian nuclear issue to UNSC, Russia supported Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy and opposed any imposition of sanctions on Iran.³³ Russia offered optimal level fuel enrichment at its facilities for Iran's nuclear power plants, and even suggested joint enrichment of uranium. Iran rejected the Russian proposals and tried to persuade Russia to vote in favor of Iran at the IAEA meeting. However, Russia

voted in favor of referring the Iranian nuclear issue to UNSC, which led to imposition of economic sanctions on Iran in 2006, 2007, and 2008.³⁴ Due to the UN sanctions, the \$800 million S-300 Anti-aircraft missile system deal between Russia and Iran was halted in 2010, three years after it was signed in 2007.³⁵ In Jan 2015, Russia was again considering fulfilling the requirements of the S-300 missile deal.³⁶ Such developments show the growing relationship between Iran and Russia. Iran still sees Russia as a rescuer in case the situation deteriorates further between Iran and the West, a perception further strengthened after the Ukrainian crisis and Russian response to the West. On the other hand, Russia is more than willing to use the Iranian card against the West in future. Both Russia and Iran also have shown solidarity over a number of issues on global security such as the Syrian crisis.

Of late, Russia and Iran have drawn closer to each other due to a number of common concerns and grievances. For them the primary reason for those grievances is common that is, the US and its allies. Their economies have been hit due to the imposed economic sanctions. The ongoing fall in the oil prices has also severely affected their economies. Both Russia and Iran allegedly hold the US and its Middle East allies responsible for the same. Iran's current budget was designed for an oil price of \$100 per barrel and oil exports of 1.5 million barrels per day, and therefore Iran is not able to meet its export requirements due to the continuous drop in oil prices.³⁷ Similarly, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a three year Russian budget based on an oil price of \$100 per barrel, so current drop in the oil prices has damaged the Russian economy as well.³⁸ Such grievances have surely brought the two victims closer to each other.

The relationship between Iran and China has been shaped by their experience with the Western powers. Prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution, the relationship between Iran and China was kept to a minimum mainly due to the US pressure on Iran.³⁹ However, over the last three decades, their respective strategic and economic interests and necessities have

shaped the relationship between China and Iran. For China, the strategic importance of Iran lies in leverage against the US. Any conflict between Iran and the US would benefit China as the US would have to divert its resources from Asia-Pacific. Economically, China's maintaining good relations with Iran, with vast oil reserves, will help in accomplishing its quest for energy security. In the event of any conflict between China and the US, the US may cut off Chinese sea lines of communications (SLOCs). In that case, China can rely on Iran for its energy supplies through the land route through Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Strategically for Iran, China is a potential ally and a counterweight against the US. Economically, China is Iran's largest trading partner.⁴⁰ China also provides major investment and technology for the economic development of Iran. Iran sees China as a major player, which can help Iran overcome its global isolation. Both nations enjoy the fact that they don't have any pre-conditions for enhanced ties. The discovery of Iran's secret nuclear enrichment program in 2002 led to the withdrawal of many Western companies, but created new opportunities for Chinese firms and diplomats to enhance economic and strategic ties with Iran.⁴¹ For the last one decade, the bilateral relations were focused on energy sector because of Iran's growing isolation from the West, and China's energy requirements and quest to diversify its sources of energy supplies. It resulted in China becoming the largest trading partner of Iran by 2012, with plans to increase their trade to \$100 billion by 2016.⁴²

China supported Iran's nuclear program extensively until the later part of 1990's. It slowed down the assistance in 1997 to improve its relations with the US and develop its own civil nuclear program. China voted against Iran in the IAEA meeting to refer the Iranian nuclear issue to the UNSC and voted in favor of UNSC sanctions against Iran. However, China deliberately delayed the passage of these resolutions, probably to help Iran gain time to move ahead with its nuclear program.⁴³ China tried to dilute each of the sanctions, keeping in

mind its own interests in Iranian oil. China policy has been a fine balancing act on the Iranian nuclear issue, trying to secure its energy demands through Iran, without alienating the US.

The Chinese are wary of emergence of Iran as a great regional power and would not like to see an Iran capable of dominating the Gulf region and Central Asia.⁴⁴ However, any conflict in the Far East involving China and the US would change the dynamics of the relationship. Altogether, the dynamics of Russo-Iranian ties, Sino-Iranian ties, and Sino-Russian ties may lead to a strengthened Russia-China-Iran axis (probably underway), with all three nations having a common point of contention that is, policies of the West, mainly the US.

There have been a few significant events in the last few years that bolstered the relationship amongst the three nations. Since 2011, the ongoing Syrian Civil War has been the prime example. All three nations have stood behind the Assad regime, both for their respective interests and to defeat the efforts of the West under the UN umbrella to solve the problem. At least four times Russia and China have vetoed UNSC resolutions related to Syrian crisis. In May 2014, Russia and China vetoed a UNSC resolution that would have referred the conflict in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁴⁵ The Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2014 also brought the three nations, mainly Russia and Iran, closer to each other. If the Ukraine crisis continues, it could lead to a Cold War-like situation in which Iran and China form an axis with Russia.

Another significant event in the geo-economic and geostrategic sphere was the conclusion of \$400 billion gas deal between Russia and China in May 2014, amidst the ongoing Ukraine Crisis, the deal has been considered as a major step towards the strengthened “hydrocarbon axis” between Russia and China.⁴⁶ The 30-year deal will help the Russian economy at a time when it faces sanctions from the West over the Ukraine crisis and will also help Russia overcome the impact of the ongoing fall in the oil prices. This deal

would help China to meet its growing energy requirements. With large oil and gas reserves, Iran can expect a similar kind of deal from China. According to Walter Russell Mead, an American academic, "...China, Iran, and Russia are all pushing back against the political settlement of the Cold War...What binds these powers is their agreement that status quo must be revised...Leaders in all three countries agree that U.S. power is the chief obstacle to achieving their revisionist goals."⁴⁷ This geostrategic scenario will create global instability.

In order to prevent the formation of the Russia-China-Iran axis, the West needs to make tough choices, and allow some economic concessions to Iran. It will be highly unreasonable to assume that any kind of deal brokered with Iran would lead to complete abandonment of its nuclear program. A middle path has to be chosen to get Iran on a track that does not lead to Moscow or Beijing. According to Dr. Leslie H. Gelb, a prominent foreign policy expert from the US, "There is no harm in developing a deep understanding of Iran as a country, one with a proud linguistic, cultural and political tradition, a population which is not nearly as anti-American as most of the Sunni Arab nations, and holds elections fairer and freer than most countries in the region."⁴⁸ Currently, a driving force in Iran is the need for the economic development,⁴⁹ and Iran knows that it cannot be restored without US assistance. India is an ideal option, capable of drawing Iran away from Russia and China.

India can use its soft power in the field of economy, infrastructure development, and people to people contact. India and Iran have historical linkages with rich civilizational background and cultural ties. Both nations still enjoy a cordial relationship in spite of India's vote against Iran in IAEA. They have strong economic ties, with Iran as one of the major suppliers of oil to India. India does not have any expansionist ambitions, unlike Russia and China. India and Iran have reasonable people to people contacts. India has a considerable Shia population and Iran considers itself as the bastion of Shi'ite ideology. India's economic growth gives it the capability to invest in the Iranian economy. These are the particular

reasons that should give credibility to India's involvement in the positive engagement of Iran. However, the West should not ignore the fact that India's involvement will be based on its national interests.

India needs to expand its trade with Iran and this will decrease the Iranian dependence on China. India has been one of the largest buyers of oil from Iran. Until 2010-2011, Iran was the second largest oil supplier for India, when Iraq took second place.⁵⁰ This development was presumably attributed to the US sanctions on the Iranian crude trade. This trend can be reversed and India can further increase its trade to give Iran a suitable market for its oil supplies. Apart from benefitting India and Iran, this step will impede Russia-China-Iran axis. In spite of being one of the largest oil producers, Iran lacks refinery infrastructure and imports 40% of refined products.⁵¹ India also can supply refined crude products to Iran as well as assist Iran in developing infrastructure for the refineries. It can also work towards completion of Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline project, which has not progressed because of the growing differences between India and Iran, and pressure from the West.

India should also work towards developing transportation infrastructure in Iran. India has already taken a step in this direction, as in October 2014 the Indian cabinet approved \$85 million (approximately) development project of Chahbahar Port in Iran.⁵² The approval of this project shows that the new Indian government has the capability to make major decisions. India should take on projects to connect the Chahbahar Port with the Zaranj-Delaram Highway in Afghanistan and further to Central Asia. Increased connectivity to Central Asia from Persian Gulf is in the interest of India, Iran, and the West. Such projects will help Iran revive its economy and reduce Iran's incentive to look to Russia and China.

India needs to improve its diplomatic efforts in Iran with the conduct of more high profile state level visits to Iran. Apart from regular visits by the foreign ministers of both the countries, the heads of government such as Prime Minister of India and President of Iran

should meet regularly to discuss regional security, their global contemporary issues, trade relations, and nuclear energy. In this context India needs to take the initiative. India should make concerted efforts to raise the relationship from cordial to strategic.

India can further engage Iran through military diplomacy. In the past they have been part of various joint naval exercises. Both countries should make efforts to conduct regular joint exercises for all the services. Defense initiatives will further build confidence between the two nations and, to an extent, will reduce Iran's inclination towards Russia and China. India can improve defense ties by taking initiatives such as assistance in modernization of defense forces, assistance in research and development, regular training and exercises, joint counter terrorism exercises, and maintenance support for Russian built equipment.

India should also work towards enhancing people to people contacts. India has a considerable Shia population. Both the countries can enhance the already existing people to people contacts to create a better understanding of each other's culture. India can provide opportunities for higher education to the Iranian students which will further help to improve the ties. The provision of higher education would be helpful in promoting democracy and liberal ideas amongst the Iranian youth. In May 2013, then External Affairs Minister of India inaugurated an Indian cultural center in Iran, with Iran already having two cultural centers in India.⁵³ Such initiatives would further promote people to people contacts between the two countries.

India can use its soft power to engage Iran positively. Indian engagement of Iran, not impossible, will bring Iran into the mainstream of the global security architecture. Apart from preventing the establishment of the Russia-China-Iran axis, it will further bridge the trust gap between Iran and the West. Such a contemporary global security scenario will serve the interests of all the players involved in the Persian Gulf region--Iran, India, and the West.

Conclusion

India shares good relations with Iran and it has the capability to engage Iran in a positive direction. The Iranian nuclear program affects India, thereby creating an opportunity for India to involve itself and resolve the issue. It is recommended that India's policy makers join the efforts of the West in ensuring a globally accepted Iranian nuclear program. As part of P5+1 negotiation talks with Iran, India should persuade Iran to make its nuclear program more transparent and promote the development of civil nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. India can engage Iran on regional security issues such as the rebuilding of Afghanistan, which will make Iran a responsible stake holder for maintaining stability of the Persian Gulf region. The cooperation on Afghanistan issue can be a stepping stone to engage Iran on other regional security issues such as the Syrian crisis and the ISIS threat. Apart from engaging Iran on regional security issues, India can further strengthen its ties with Iran economically, diplomatically, and by enhancing people to people contacts. This will help in impeding the establishment of a Russia-China-Iran axis.

India's positive engagement of Iran can help resolve the Iranian nuclear issue and has the capability to prevent Iran from joining hands with Russia and China. However, a clear understanding has to be made amongst all the players including India, Iran, and the West to ensure that the end result brings more peace and stability globally. At the same time, an active Indian involvement in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue can become a model for India's involvement in other regional and global security issues. It would also be consistent with India's emerging global power status.

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