

A Deepening Strategic Partnership between India and Iran under the Modi Regime

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Abstract:

India's rise in global affairs has led to more complex relations, particularly with the Islamic Republic of Iran. India and Iran have long supported the individuality of the two countries and the relationship between the two countries is almost a thousand years old. In international politics, the growing relationship between different countries is becoming more and more complicated. Iran is becoming a reprehensive and isolated state by great powers like the U.S.A because of its nuclear program, especially Israel and several other neighbouring countries in the Gulf region, who see an increasingly powerful state Iran as a threat. As a result, there is always pressure on India to cut diplomatic ties with Iran. Despite these hurdles, India has forged a strategic partnership with Iran, ignoring pressure from allies. The present relationship between the two countries has become more prominent, especially during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Realism and material interests are the real basis of the foreign policy of India and Iran. Iran is strategically important to India. The recent agreement between India and Iran on the issue of the Chabahar port is a unique sign of the relationship between the two countries. To India, proper relations with Iran are very crucial in restraining security threats from Pakistan and China. This research explores the geo-strategic significance of Iran for India in changing international strategic circumstances. It will strategically analyse the changing patterns of Indo-Iran relations in different areas under the Modi regime.

Keywords: India, Iran, Energy Resources, Strategic Cooperation, Security, Geopolitics.

Introduction:

The relationship of mutual thought, consciousness, and exchanges between the two ancient civilizations of India and Iran is centuries old and dates back almost to the Neolithic period. The people of India and Iran have cultural ties as well as linguistic and ethnic similarities

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resulting in inter-exchanges, borrowings, connections, and influencing each other. A relationship between India and Iran has been established since 1950 through the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Perpetual Peace. Although affiliated with CENTO during the Cold War, Iran developed a close relationship with Pakistan (Goud & Mookherjee, 2014). Even during the Indo-Pakistan war and Pakistan-Bangladesh war in 1965 and 1971 respectively, Iran helped Pakistan by providing military assistance. The Islamic Republic of Iran was born as a new state when Khomeini gained political power in Iran through the Tehran Revolution in 1979. From 1979 onwards, relations between India and Iran became closer. During the Iraq-Iran war which continued from 1980 to 1988, India remained neutral and India maintained economic and diplomatic relations with Iran, including oil imports (Singh, 2023).

The advent of British colonialism in the subcontinent weakened the relationship between the two countries. However, after independence, it reviewed bilateral relations in both countries. The rise of bipolar structure in the international systems was a hindrance in the bilateral relations between the two countries during the Cold War period (Pant, 2004). The threat of the Soviet Union in the Middle East forced Iran to join the capitalist bloc in the West led by the US. At that time India followed the policy of non-alignment without participating in any alliance (Naaz, 2001). During this period, Nehru's support for President Nasser as an Arab leader, ignoring the threat of the Soviet Union, worsened Tehran's attitude towards India in the 1950s. This provoked the Shah to form an Islamic bloc that deepened ties with Pakistan. Tehran's increasingly close relationship with Pakistan has at times been a source of concern for India. During this period there were economic restrictions between the two countries and trade cooperation relations were fragile (Pant, 2004). Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and India's support for Iran's political instability in the wake of the 1979 revolution dampened Iran-India bilateral relations. Thus, bilateral relations between the two countries have since improved. However, Iran's position on the Kashmir issue was more rigid (Pant, 2004).

In 1983, the India-Iran Joint Commission was formed to facilitate economic cooperation and foreign ministerial meetings (Singh, 2023). Trade and economic exchanges between Iran and India continued in the 1980s and 1990s. India's neutrality and silent stake in Iraq's intervention in Kuwait in 1990 and the progress of the Gulf War broadened the relationship between the two countries. Bilateral relations between the two countries have not taken a new turn since the mid-1990s. the fall of the Soviet Union, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's leadership, the isolation of Iran after the Gulf War, the growing terrorist threat, and the rise of the Taliban lifted the clouds of instability between the two countries, and a new dawn for foreign emerged. A major

turning point in India-Iran bilateral relations took place when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Iran in 1993, the first Prime Minister to visit Iran since the 1979 war. Hashemi paid an official visit to India in 1995 as a token of his goodwill. Since then, high-level exchanges of bilateral relations between the two countries have led to further political revival of relations. Even in 2003, Vajpayee and Khamenei signed the Tehran Declaration and in 2003 when Khamenei visited India, the New Delhi Declaration was signed between the two countries (Singh, 2023). However, the changing international environment caused the ups and downs of their relationship, not a new one, and hindered the progress of friendship between the two countries. The close relationship between the two countries was formed mainly to counter US hegemony and the development of a unipolar world during the post-Cold War era, India's need to counter Pakistan and the Islamic world, and the increasing strategic importance of emerging Central Asian states and strengthening economic ties. Later, in 2006, India voted against Iran's nuclear activities in the UN Security Council, angering Iran. On the other hand, Iran now again criticizes Pakistan for supporting separatist terrorism, and Iranian authorities also accuse Pakistan of helping Baloch Separatist Movements, its leader Rigi, to help ISI (Jahanbegloo, 2016).

Bilateral relations between the two countries further strengthened when Narendra Modi visited Iran in May 2016. A joint statement titled Civilizational Connect Contemporary Context was pressed and 12 MOU agreements were signed at various levels. During the visit, trilateral relations between India, Afghanistan, and Iran regarding trade, and transport were established (Singh, 2023). Iranian President Rouhani visited India in 2018 and a joint statement was signed between them. The two countries signed about 13 MOUs during this period (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Thus, the history of bilateral relations between India and Iran is a history of ebb and flow where friendship and enmity can be observed for various reasons.

Strategic Dimension of India's Relationship with Iran:

Political Relations:

Political relations have moved forward though constant ups and down between India and Iran due to external international environment as well as domestic factors. For example, during the Cold War, relations between the two countries deteriorated. At that time, as Iran took the side of the US, India continued to lead the Non-Alignment Movement. Bilateral relations worsened when India supported NATO'S presence in Afghanistan and Iran abstained from it. India has

never hesitated to voice its anger against Iran's nuclear programme. Although gradually developing a friendly relationship with Iran, in 2005 the International Atomic Energy voted against Iran. Originally, after the Iranian revolution in 1979, friendly relations between the two countries developed from the 1970s, but again when India supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War relations began to deteriorate and became weak (Ali, 1975). Tensions came to a head when the Indian crude oil tanker 'MT Desh Shanti' was seized by Iran. Iran's continued support to Pakistan has caused India to face several political problems. However, it is true that there are instances when Iran has objected to Pakistan's anti-India activities at the Human Rights Commission and Organization of Islamic Cooperation levels. However, the two countries jointly supported the Northern Alliance's fight against the Taliban government in Afghanistan. They both supported the US-backed anti-Taliban government of Ashraf Ghani. India supported Iran's accession to the South Asian for Regional Cooperation as an observer state. It can be said that globalization has made Iran an important political partner of India (Harshe, 1997). Iran has strongly supported India-Pakistan dialogue and finding a solution to the Kashmir issue which marked a change in Iran's attitude towards India. Iran and India came on a common platform to criticise the excessive involvement of USA in South and South-West Asia (Harshe, 1997). When Iran was the head of the Organization of Islamic Countries, it was neutral on the Kashmir issue. The two countries in their joint statement condemned terrorism and Taliban religious fundamentalism. It was strongly condemned the destruction of Bamiyan Buddha by Taliban (EPW, 2001). Finally, through Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in May, 2016, bilateral relations between the two countries became stronger.

There have also been two parliamentary speaker-level visits between India and Iran. The speaker Meira Kumar visited Iran in 2011 and then Irani speaker Ali Larijani visited India in 2013 which took the relationship between the two countries to a new high (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the president of Iran met for the first time on the sidelines of the SOC Heads' Summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan in September 2022. During this time, both leaders committed to bilateral cooperation, and the two leaders also met on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in August 2023, especially on trade and connectivity. When Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited Iran in July-August 2024, he met President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi. On the other hand, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited India in June 2022. A mutual legal assistance agreement in civil and commercial matters was signed during the visit. In August 2022, the Ministry of Ports Sarbananda Sonowal joined the waterway and visited Iran. During this time the MoU was

signed on the recognition of certificate of eligibility for unrestricted travel between Iran and India. The two countries have established several bilateral consultive mechanisms at various levels, including Joint Committee meetings, State Departments consultations, Security consultations at the level of National Security Advisors and Tribal Security Advisors, and meetings of the Joint Consular Committee. India and Iran have working groups to facilitate cooperation in various areas of mutual interest. The two countries also have cooperation at the level of law enforcement agencies. In May 2022, a bilateral meeting was held between India's Narcotics Control Bureau and Iran's Anti-Narcotics Police on counter-narcotics cooperation. Both countries are involved in several fortnightly United Nations and its agencies as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Indian Ocean Rim Association, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, and Asian Parliamentary Assembly (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).

During the Eid ceremony in June 2017, Khomeini compared the conflict in Kashmir to the conflicts in Yemen and Bahrain. When the Indian government abrogated Article 370 in 2019, Khomeini said India should protect the interests of Muslims (Singh, 2023). This is not the first time Iran has said this because, in a statement in 2010, Iran said the same thing. Since 1979, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been engaged in a proxy war in which both have used religion as a tool to gain power. India has always tried to maintain balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia but Iran does not appreciate India's leaning towards Saudi Arabia and Khomeini's recent words have to be seen in that context. Iran has asserted that Iran is an important player in the Middle East and India cannot ignore it. India, however, ignored Ayatollah's provocation in Kashmir. For India, Iran is a strategic political partner to sustain its diplomacy.

Energy and Oil Diplomacy:

India has been buying oil from Iran since the Cold War. Currently, Russian Gazprom and Chinese National Petroleum Cooperation are the two most recent new petroleum players to emerge. Iran was upset with India's activities regarding oil imports. India allied with the USA during the oil embargo and reduced oil imports from Iran. As per Indian policy today only Indian transport can import oil from abroad. India is set to amend that policy to allow foreign shipping container firms to import oil. India is going to adopt an energy security level. India is planning to adopt an energy security level gas import policy, which is planning to charter large container carriers from Australia, Russia, Iran, and Mozambique. Iran is India's essential gas supply partner. Diplomatic dialogue has started with India and Iran to discuss the possibility of a future Iran, India, Oman pipeline. India uses UCO Bank to finance Iran. This is because UCO

Bank has the lowest exposure to the US and it is less vulnerable to US CAATSA approval. In 2008, ONGC Bidesh Limited discovered gas in the Farzad. B offshore field. Farzad. B is Iran's largest gas discovery. The IOC and Oil Consortium were established to secure rights over Farzad.B. India has sought preferential treatment in the development of Farzad. B's exploration and gas prospecting rights under the 2012 exploration agreement. Iran was not keen to give any priority to India, because India was in support of the US during the sanctions against Iran and Iran was not very happy about that. After the 2015 Lausanne Framework, India proposed \$6 billion for gas field development and \$5 billion for LNG export terminals. Chinese National Petroleum and Russian Rosneft have offered interest in Farzad.B after the embargo was lifted. India has reduced oil imports from Iran since 2017 due to a lack of preferential access but has not affected Iran. Iran said India should sell gas from Farzad. B. India claims that it is difficult to find gas in Farzad. B because the gas is impure and the extracted gas needs to be cleaned, which is costly. Selling this gas is unprofitable for India after incurring additional costs at current international prices. Energy expert Deepak said India needs Iranian gas as Iran is geographically close to India and India lacks gas. Iran claimed that India blasts gas, processes, sets up and sells, and exports LNG terminals. It also pledged an \$11 billion investment in India. Iran now claims that India can explore consortium gas and deliver it to an offshore field at a landfall point on the Gulf Islands. Iran said that India will not have to refine gas like sulfur because Iran will do it. It will reduce the overall cost because India will not set up LNG terminals. India will save \$5 billion but India has to set up a development facility for gas exploration and it will not cost \$6 billion as previously planned but has to spend \$4 billion (Singh, 2023).

In terms of energy and oil diplomacy, India imports a lot of crude oil from Iran which alone imports about 90% of all Indian oil from Iran every year. Iran is the world's second largest holder of natural gas and India is among the world's leading gas imports. Along with fast-growing economic ties, an energy tie has emerged between India and Iran. India's energy relationship with Iran has also seen challenges as well as developments under Narendra Modi's regime. India was initially Iran's second-largest oil customer but US sanctions forced India to stop importing oil from Iran in 2019. Despite this, the two countries have tried to strengthen their energy cooperation. Iran has also expressed its readiness to meet India's energy needs. Iran became India's third-largest oil supplier during the first five years of the Modi Government. India imports 11.35% of its crude oil needs from Iran. Just as Iran is interested in

supplying energy to India, India is interested in contributing to Iran's food security (Srivastava, 2024).

Nuclear Diplomacy:

Relations between India and Iran have been ups and down over nuclear programme. While India has openly supported Iran's peaceful nuclear technology, it has also had differing views on the timing and Iranian actions. Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee said, Iran must pursue a nuclear enrichment program in accordance with its international commitment, obligations and must satisfy the international community that the program is entirely peaceful. Although India voted on the issue of Iran's engagement activities in the US Security Council in 2005 and said that it had repeatedly called for a peaceful program and resolved the conflict and claimed that violence against Iran had been carried out for its nuclear program.

Together, India and Saudi Arabia have jointly made international efforts to resolve the controversy over Iran's nuclear program. Dialogue and Tehran's positive response to defuse the controversy, and the two leaders then the Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh and Saudi king Abdullah, who visited Iran at 2012 meeting, called for the continuation of these efforts.

It can be said that Iran and India have a complex nuclear relationship with both cooperation and tensions. India and Iran are cooperating on nuclear energy. India provides training to Iranian scientists. It is cooperating on research projects, including nuclear research centres, but there is a tension that India's growing ties with the US have also put pressure on India to limit nuclear cooperation with Iran. Although currently India and Iran continue to cooperate on nuclear energy but this is limited due to international sanctions. A solution to Iran's nuclear issue could lead to India and Iran increasing their nuclear cooperation. India's investment in Iran's energy sector could also increase. It should be noted that the relationship is subject to change based on global geopolitical developments and bilateral dynamics. India's relationship with Iran during Modi's regime is affected by various factors such as Balancing Act, Limited Cooperation, Chabahar port etc. India welcomes JCPOAC joint plan with Iran and world powers. In 2015, India and Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Nuclear Cooperation. Modi's visit to Iran in 2016 reinforced this policy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). Overall, India's nuclear relationship with Iran under the Modi government has been characterized by a desire to balance competing interests and priorities.

Economic and Trade Relations:

Economic and trade relations between India and Iran are quite strong and mutually beneficial. Iran is India's second largest supplier of crude oil and India is one of the largest foreign investors in Iran's oil and gas industry (Harshe, 1997). Economic relations between the two countries are very significant. The statistics of Iran's diesel exports from India are also substantial. Both countries have initiated many joint ventures in various fields such as the environment, automobile industry, agriculture, textiles, tourism, oil exploration, etc. Apart from energy cooperation Iran's information technology, agriculture, and petroleum chemicals complement each other (Khajehpour, 2001)

Since the mid-1990s, the adversarial relationship between India and Iran has taken a new turn. As a new relationship develops in the political sphere, the relationship also improves in the economic sphere. Many trade exchange agreements were signed between the two countries in 1996. In 1997, a transit trade agreement was signed between India, Iran, and Turkmenistan. This treaty was originally signed to use the Caspian Sea for bilateral trade relations between the two countries and continued for many years. However, some of the proposals made by the two countries at that time remain incomplete. Energy is at the core of India and Iran's long-term bilateral relationship. Plans are also underway to build a gas pipeline between India and Iran. Strong investment cooperation between India and Iran can also be seen in the development of infrastructure projects. India has provided financial assistance to Iran for the construction of a highway between Zaranj and Delaram. Even both India and Iran have paid for the construction and development of Chabahar port. In this context, an agreement was signed between India and Afghanistan, India also helped Iran finance the development of the Malik-Chabahar Road. Trade with Iran needs to be further developed in the context of the growing importance of emerging markets and Central Asia in the era of globalization. Transit facilities and a friendly all-round relationship with Iran can secure India's energy security. From this perspective, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016 helped in the development of economic relations between the two countries. Iran has about 15% of the world's gas reserves. So, India should take its economic relationship with Iran to another level (Singh, 2008).

Among the recent developments in the economy and trade between India and Iran under the Modi government are: India planned to import 11 million tonnes of oil from Iran in 2014. Which was 21.1% more than last year (The Economic Times, 2016). India has invested in the

development and use of Iran's Chabahar port, which has created a strategic trade route for India in Afghanistan and Central Asia. In addition, the North-South Transport Corridor is an important shipping, rail, and road route between Russia, Iran, Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Iran supplies more than 42,500 barrels of crude oil per day (Tehran Times, 2009). Thus, India has been identified as one of the largest foreign investors in Iran's oil and gas industry. All these aspects indicate the steady commercial and economic relations between India and Iran.

Cultural Relations:

India and Iran have had a strong cultural relationship since ancient times, which has survived into modern times. It is the ancient contact between the civilizations of the two countries (EPW, 2001). Religious and cultural ties between the two countries are very strong. Iran's clear government sees itself as the global leader of Shias around the world and influences India as well. Muharram is celebrated by the Shia section of Indian Muslims and the Indian government has declared the day as a national holiday. Lucknow, the capital of India's Uttar Pradesh, has been a Shia cultural centre since ancient times. India has the largest Parsi community and has made significant contributions in the fields of politics, science, cinema, industry, and culture in India. Some prominent people in Indian history like Dadabhai Naoroji, JRD Tata, Homi Bhabha, Sam Manekshaw, Freddie Mercury, and Zubin Mehta belong to the Parsi community and have made important contributions in various fields of India. India and Iran share cultural civilization past values, tradition, language, and cuisine with each other (Jorfi, 1994).

Cultural links between India and Iran can be traced back to pre-history. Persian influence came to India at the hands of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire in India. The influence of Persian culture can be seen in the language, art, and architecture of India. Persian was also the official language of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire at that time. Later, Persian became the dominant language among the Muslim community in North India. The development and evolution of the Urdu language have had a profound influence on the Persian language. Even at present, the language of Parsi is the relevant language in India. Many Indian students have an interest in the Persian language and pursue their academic careers as Persian language researchers. There are many Persian language research centers all over India. The Iran Cultural House is established in Delhi to create cultural contacts between India and Iran. The SAADI Foundation of Iran plays a significant role in making connections with Iranian culture. For Indian students, the Iranian government also organizes various long-term and short-term tours

on this occasion. An educational relationship is reflected between the two countries. As Indian universities in Pune and Bangalore have steadily flowed in numbers of Iranian students to prove it. Also, most central schools in India and their locations are notable. Various cultural programs and exchanges have taken place between Iranian and Indian university students. A large number of MoUs have been signed between various universities in both countries. University students organize food festivals and represent the latest in India. The food festival, attended by many international students including Iranian students from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, showcased the peaceful cultural, and diplomatic relations between India and Iran.

Cultural relations between India and Iran have improved tremendously in recent times under the Modi government. India and Iran have exchanged cultural delegations of artists and scholars to enhance mutual understanding. The National Book Trust of India has translated various Iranian literatures into Indian languages and on the other hand, it has translated various Indian literatures into Iranian languages. India participated in the Fajr International Film Festival held in Iran and Iran participated in the International Film Festival of India, which has led to cultural exchanges between the two countries (Ramachandran, 2016). We all know that Narendra Modi declared the 21st of June as International Yoga Day. India has promoted the practice of Yoga and Ayurveda in Iran and has also established a yoga centre in Tehran, the capital of Iran (Dhingra, 2018). India has restored the ancient Iranian city of Persepolis and cooperated with Iran in the perspective of various cultural heritage sites. In addition, India and Iran continue to organize various art exhibitions to showcase each other's art and culture.

Strategic Alliance and Regional Connectivity:

Both India and Iran share a common strategic relationship. Iran's relations with Pakistan were very close during the post-Cold War era. At that time, Iran has always supported Pakistan in the India-Pakistan dispute. Along with the condemnation of India's aggression against Pakistan, Iran's military-civilian aid to Islamabad in the 1965 war, and Shah's support for Kashmiri self-control, Iran has supported the rights of Pakistanis in Kashmir. The 1971 India-Pakistan war and its support for Pakistan, including questions, caused widespread resentment in India. Also, Iran's cooperation with CENTO created fear in India. India's non-aligned stance during the Cold War and its alliance with the SEATO and CENTO was a contrast. India was very conscious about the possibility of Pakistan supporting Iran by importing arms from CENTO (Ali, 1975).

India and Iran have signed a strategic agreement that will allow Iran to access military expertise in India. A defence cooperation agreement was also signed between the two countries in 2002. Bilateral relations between Iran and India are mainly influenced by the regional environment of the Middle East and Southeast Asia. This is also influenced by the interest of the United States in this area. An agreement on the strategic Chabahar Port was signed between India and Iran in 2015 during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Iran which was later identified as one of the steps in the advancement of friendly relations between the two countries. Fearing that China's influence in Central Asia may be reduced if relations between Iran and India are good, China continues to compete in the region to increase its influence. In recent times, India has started treating Iran as a potential regional player in Central Asia and the Near East. The prospect of the recent Chabahar Port deal further highlights this project. The signing of this agreement indicates that India and Iran will be able to deal with the region through mutual engagement. The inclusion of Iran in SCO and BRICS in 2023 was not possible without India's support (Agarwal, 2024).

India and Iran have recently signed an agreement on the Chabahar port in 2024. This will facilitate the entry of Indian goods into Afghanistan and Central Asia by India bypassing Pakistan and using a road and rail project called the International North-South Transport Corridor (Singh, 2023). This is why India Gulf of Oman. On the other hand, the North-South Transport Corridor consists of about 7200 km of sea, rail, and road lines, which will help India cross multiple borders to transport goods from Iran to Russia and it will be used as an alternative to the conventional Suez Canal route (Krishnankutty, 2024).

Conclusion:

Both India and Iran can achieve a lot together. The strong diplomacy that India has been pursuing, from an emphasis on standing by its neighbours and friends to a focus on fulfilling its national interests, is a refreshing change in Indian foreign policy. Relations between India and Iran have reached a new level during Modi's rule, currently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's third term as Prime Minister is looking to strengthen its strategic alignment in Asia. Iran, on the other hand, has reasserted itself in recent times by acquiring a reliable new partnership. Iran's newly elected President Massoud said in his statement after coming to power that his government would build a balanced relationship with all countries in line with national interests and prerequisites for peace. The scale of the relationship between India and Iran is immense which includes cultural connections as well as civilizational connections. The

relationship between these two countries is multi-dimensional. However, the various regional and extra-regional issues have challenged the relationship between the two countries. Regional factors such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia play a special role in India-Iran relations. However, both countries have adopted a cooperative stance on Afghanistan and Central Asia as both countries have stakes in these two regions. Countries like the US and China play an important role in India-Iran relations. There have been many instances in the past where US intervention has led India to withdraw from many areas of relations with Iran. The current international environment is also in a critical state. It has been a terrible situation in the Middle East for a long time. The ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine has heated the region. At the same time, a new conflict has developed between Iran and Israel over Palestine, which has almost brought the two countries to war. The world situation is taking sides and defining their positions to face that war. Which can create a dire situation in the future. All these conditions include India. India has a strategic friendly relationship with Israel. India imports the most arms from Israel after Russia. India continues to adopt the de-hyphenated policy as per its earlier policy of non-alignment. Next, it is to be seen that, what is the position of India in the equation of this new politics of West Asia and how much influence that position can have on India's international diplomacy.

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