

# 3

## India- Iran Relations: Implications for Maritime Security in the Western Indian Ocean

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**Abstract.** Iran and Russia recently conducted a maritime drill in the Persian Gulf. There were contradictory reports on Indian participation. While Iran was keen for India to join, India kept away from this exercise. This paper shall examine the nature of the Indian position vis-à-vis Iran. India has long term political, economic and security ties with Iran. The Chabahar port is being built by India. India has long been seen as neutral in conflicts between GCC countries and Iran. One challenge faced by India was the sanctions by the United States of America (USA) on Iran. After the waiver was not renewed in April 2019 India had to stop buying oil from Iran. Consequently, Iran has been seen as gravitating towards China. Iran and China are reported to be moving towards a strategic agreement. In another development, Iran has reportedly ousted India from a rail line linking Zahedan in Afghanistan and Chabahar. This was supposed to be a trilateral agreement of the three countries. There are specific challenges for maritime security from the Iran-US tensions. The PLA-N is increasing its presence in the Persian Gulf. There is poor coordination between India and the USA in this region. The Strait of Hormuz is an important choke point for India. The recent non-participation in the naval exercise is perhaps symptomatic of deeper issues. The change of government in the USA opens new possibilities for Iran. Here too India could play a constructive role. Given the position of Strategic Autonomy it is seen as a neutral party by all concerned. This paper will address these issues and attempt to conclude on the way forward.

**Keywords:** Maritime, Iran, Russia, Persian Gulf, Indo-Pacific, Indian Ocean, Chabahar, China

## **Introduction: India's Maritime Domain**

Iran and Russia recently conducted a maritime drill named “*Iran-Russia Maritime Security Belt 2021*” in the Persian Gulf. There were contradictory reports on Indian participation. While Iran was keen for India to join, India kept away from this exercise (Times Now News, 2021). This decision of India to not participate once again brings to light India-Iran bilateral relations. India's primary area of maritime interest include, India's coastal area and maritime zone; the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, and their littoral regions; the Persian Gulf and its littoral; South-West Indian Ocean, including Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) island nations therein; the Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, and their littoral regions; and East Coast of Africa littoral regions (Indian Navy, 2016), (Parmar, 2014) (Parmar, 2014). The main chokepoints within India's maritime domain are those leading to, from and across the Indian Ocean, including the Six-Degree Channel, the Eight/Nine-Degree Channels, the straits of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Malacca, Singapore, Sunda, and Lombok, the Mozambique Channel and the Cape of Good Hope (Vasan, 2017). Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan gives a comprehensive list of India's maritime neighbourhood. These are categorised as Immediate, Proximate, Extended and Strategic Neighbourhood. Proximate neighbourhoods are those countries that do not share a common Territorial Sea or Exclusive Economic Zone' but whose stability affects India (Chauhan, 2019, pp. 13-16). The Indian Ocean region can be segmented as the Western Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean Island Countries and Eastern Indian Ocean (Kumar & Ghosh, 2020, pp. 2-5).

## **Determinants of Maritime Security**

The key determinants for shaping the maritime security strategy cover broader maritime strategic imperatives and more specific maritime security drivers (Indian Navy, 2016 p. 5).

## **Broader Maritime Strategic Imperatives**

India is centrally located within the Indian Ocean with an unencumbered entree through the IOR. Maritime economic activities include energy, trade, and fisheries. Freedom of Navigation (FoN) along these International Shipping Lanes (ISL) and Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) in times of conflict is a vital

national maritime interest (Indian Navy, 2016, p. 5). In fulfilment of these essentials, there are traditional and non-traditional maritime threats. These are continuously being assessed (Indian Navy, 2016, pp. 6, 33-35).

### **Traditional Threats and Sources**

These are threats from States holding an inimical posture *vis-à-vis* India. Sudden politico-economic and/or military events may also affect the regional security scenario. Moreover, there are multiple players in the global scenario and it is common to find that economic ties and imperatives are not perfectly aligned with a country's traditional political agenda (Indian Navy, 2016, pp. 33-35).

### **Non-Traditional Threats and Sources**

There has been an increase in non-traditional security threats, e.g., piracy, and terrorism, in recent years. There are often State-sponsors of such activities. Changes in the nature of non-traditional threats and challenges necessitate corresponding changes in strategies, force structures, operating methodology, training and coordination mechanisms. In the specific case of India, the events of 26/11 are a prime example of non-traditional threats.

### **Principal Rivals**

India's foreign and defence policies aim to deter the two principal rivals of China and Pakistan. This is also reflected in the Western Indian Ocean.

#### **1. China**

China is India's main strategic rival, including at sea. According to some analysts, an important aim for India's maritime policy is to reduce the influence of China (Baruah, 2017; Singh, 2018; Shrikhande, 2018). There is Chinese presence across the board, and has become more important due to that country's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) (Singh, 2018; Singh, 2017). Thus, India is forced to factor into its own security calculus. However, the concern among Indian scholars has been about China's rapid military modernisation, and locating PLA-N Fleets in the Indian Ocean region (Upadhyaya, 2017; Singh, 2018). There are contradictory views on the level of strategic advantage and disadvantage of both countries. Purely geographically India had the strategic advantage (Brewster, 2015). Given

primacy given to the USA, China is insensitive to Indian concerns. India continues to build alliances in the region (Brewster, 2018). To counter China, India has undertaken infrastructure development for smaller neighbours, humanitarian assistance, and bilateral alliances (Chaudhary & Estrada, 2018). Consequently, India is increasing engagement with Quad countries (Athreya, 2020).

## **2. Pakistan**

Although Pakistan's naval expansion was not as often noticed as it might have been before the military rise of China, the latter has been providing maritime assistance to the former and therefore, Pakistan too, has been able to upgrade its naval infrastructure (Parmar, 2014; Parmar, 2018, p. 6). This includes advanced submarines and nuclear weapons. Al-Qaeda's September 2014 attempt to capture PNS Zulfikar at the Karachi naval base provides forewarning of the vulnerability of deployed nukes to terrorists. There is a view that China's alliance with Pakistan is the biggest challenge in the Indian Ocean Region (Kumar & Ghosh, 2020, p. 4). Pakistani analysts view the naval alliance with China as a natural progression given the close economic ties, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Another shared concern is the increasing maritime power of India, especially India-US cooperation (Saeed, 2016).

## **India Maritime Foreign Policy**

India pursues a realist approach to foreign policy (Ranganathan, 2020). Indian foreign policy has the concept of strategic autonomy (Khilnani, et al., 2012). Experts see this position as a natural continuation of the erstwhile Non-Alignment Movement (Ranganathan, 2020). However, even this position is seen as having a realist slant (Brewster, 2016, p. 5). India has embarked on maritime diplomacy in the past two decades. The Indian Navy released the first doctrine in 2009. In 2007, Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy was released (Indian Navy, 2007). A second version of the Indian Maritime Doctrine was released in 2016 (Indian Navy, 2015). In the same year, a Maritime Strategy Paper was also released (Indian Navy, 2016). The latest Joint Doctrine of the Armed Forces was released in 2017 (Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, 2017). These provide the conceptual basis for India's defence policy and strategy, including Military Diplomacy.

The basic aim of India's defence diplomacy is to promote goodwill towards India overseas (Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, 2017, pp. 21-22; Jaishankar, 2016). The two main aims are increasing cooperation and signalling intent to rivals (Athreya, 2020, p. 60). The larger purpose of the navy's diplomatic role is to favourably shape the maritime environment in the furtherance of national interests, in consonance with the foreign policy and national security objectives (Indian Navy, 2015, p. 151). As part of maritime diplomacy, India has adopted visions of security and growth for all in the region (SAGAR) and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) (Athreya, 2020a).

## **Challenges for India in the Persian Gulf**

The scenario in the Persian Gulf creates challenges for India due to various reasons.

### **1. Geography**

An important part of India's proximate neighbourhood is the Strait of Hormuz including countries of the Persian Gulf and North Arabian Sea (Indian Navy, 2016, pp. 17-21). A particular area of concern has been the Persian Gulf. There has been spill-over effect from land to sea, giving rise to non-traditional threats and maritime security challenges, such as piracy, terrorism, and humanitarian crises. There has been continued militarisation of the region and proliferation of weapons amongst non-state groups, including private security organisations (Indian Navy, 2016, p. 37).

### **2. Regional Issues**

There are challenges in the Middle East that India has no control over. Regional turmoil, civil wars, internal strife, geopolitical competitions are a feature of the Middle East and have muddled India's options. Whereas India has friendly relations with all Gulf States there are challenges in the region. Animosities are worsening in the region especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There are tensions within the Gulf Cooperation Council states. The US and Israel are also active in the region (Kumar & Ghosh, 2020, p. 4). India has an extended harmonising role among these states (Quamar, 2018, p. 8).

### 3. Extra Regional Powers

Several leading powers maintain military presence in the IOR to safeguard their interests, through military bases and forward deployed units (Indian Navy, 2016, p. 37). Extra regional powers especially the United States Navy, PLA-Navy and Russian Navy are getting active in the region. There are often skirmishes between the US and Iranian Navies. This creates much anxiety for FoN in the Strait of Hormuz, a major artery for global trade (Kumar & Ghosh, 2020, p. 4). Given the nearness of Iran to the Strait of Hormuz, its part in Constabulary operations in the western IOR is crucial (Behal, 2018).

### US- Iran Relations

The United States of America has long been active in the Persian Gulf region. The U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) states that it will support a free and open Indo-Pacific. Further it will build partnerships for deterrence and free access to common domains (U.S. Defense Department, 2018, p. 9). The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report mentions the relevance of free and open Indo-Pacific. This includes governance, peace, diplomacy, economics, and security (Department of Defense, 2019, p. 3). The NDS aims to have a stable Middle East that enables stable global energy markets and trade routes.

Further it intends to consolidate gains in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere and *“to support the lasting defeat of terrorists as we sever their sources of strength and counterbalance Iran”* (U.S. Defense Department, 2018, p. 9). The US Navy maintains a presence in the Persian Gulf. US naval assets in the Gulf and the Strait are part of the Bahrain-based US Navy’s 5th Fleet, itself under the United States Military’s Central Command (CENTCOM) (Department of Defense, 2021). It identifies priorities as freedom of navigation, regional commerce, global energy supplies, and the global economy (Department of Defense, 2021).

### 1. JCPOA

The most significant aspect of the US-Iran relationship is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or nuclear deal (Arms Control Association, 2021). This agreement was laden with problems from the very beginning and even during its implementation. There have been differences

between the European Union and USA. There were misgivings among the EU States and UK on increased US sanctions on Iran. European Union (EU) States were keen that Iran comply with the JCPOA terms but were not in favour of aggressive sanctions by the USA (Einhorn, 2020). Even the EU member countries' own economies were affected by such US sanctions (Tabrizi & Dell, 2017). Iran announced on 05th January, 2020 that it will not honour the agreement.

## **2. Iranian Policy**

At the 2018 Munich Security Conference, the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Zarif mentioned that the US made wrong choices that have caused trouble in the Middle East. He suggested a strong region with no single hegemon. There is a need to accept differences. He commended the JCPOA as an example of non-zero-sum game. Zarif suggested a regional dialogue for security as the only viable alternative to address issues. There can also be dialogue between scholars and thinkers. Zarif also mentioned the need to honour UN Principles. The Minister mentioned that there is ultimately the need for a regional non-aggression pact to address traditional and non-traditional security threats (Munich Security Conference, 2018). Speaking at IONS in 2018, the commander of the Iranian Navy stressed that regional navies should ensure security and that outsiders would impose foreign security arrangements. Thus, regional collaboration was necessary (IONS, 2018).

## **3. Covid-19 Pandemic**

The world has faced the coronavirus pandemic. Iran is one of the worst affected countries in the world. It has been badly hit partly due to lack of precautions. In the current scenario Iran is facing an extra crisis especially given the economic hardship caused by the sanctions. There has been some humanitarian aid from other Gulf countries (Singh, 2020). Many friendly countries like China, France, Turkey, Japan, Qatar and Turkmenistan have also offered assistance to Iran. There has also been assistance from the WHO (Roy, 2020). However, there is little chance of the US removing sanctions on Iran (Singh, 2020; Fathollah-Nejad & Naeni, 2020).

## **4. Targeted Assassinations**

Major General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the special forces and intelligence wing of the IRGC was assassinated on 03rd January 2020 around 1:00 a.m. local time, by an alleged U.S. drone strike near Baghdad International Airport. The United States of America claimed responsibility and justified their actions based on a supposed death of US personnel and continued threat (Department of Defense, 2020; Watling, 2020). A retaliatory attack was launched by Iran on US bases in Iraq (Singh, 2020). The USA considers these to be beyond the threshold of grey zone attacks and having lowered the bar for future attacks (Department of Defense, 2021). On 27 November 2020, Brigadier General Mohsen Fakhrizadeh of the IRGC, a key nuclear physicist was assassinated. This too is believed to be at the behest of the USA (Singh, 2020).

## **Maritime Security Challenges**

The major casualty of the tensions in the Persian Gulf and US- Iran conflicts is maritime security.

### **1. Freedom of Navigation**

Iran's Naval deterrence is based on blocking the Strait of Hormuz by sea, air and land. Iran has a dual maritime force. The Iranian Navy is a conventional blue water force that covers the Gulf of Oman, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) conducts asymmetrical operations with the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman (Kumar & Ghosh, 2020, pp. 16-17). Freedom of Navigation will be the main casualty of any such tensions.

### **2. Incidents**

Given the US naval presence in the region, there are often skirmishes with Iranian naval forces (Kumar & Ghosh, 2020, pp. 16-17; Abbas, 2020). In 2019 the US has designated the IRGC as a terrorist organisation (Department of State, 2019). Both the USA and Iran have implemented constabulary measures to deal with such attacks (Abbas, 2020). The USA CENTCOM website mentions the need to deter further attacks by Iran (Department of Defense, 2021).



## **Impact on India**

Increased tension in India's areas of interest can adversely impact maritime security and prosperity in those areas and adjacent waters, with consequent effect on India's maritime interests (Indian Navy, 2016, p. 37). Iran has been important to India for the following reasons:

### **1. Energy Security**

Adhering to American sanctions, India has reduced oil imports from Iran. This has created a chasm between India and Iran. In turn, Iran notwithstanding an Indian consortium discovering gas deposits at Farzad B gas field, Iran has vacillated on giving exploitation rights to Indian companies. This prompted New Delhi to instruct its oil importers to reduce their take from Iran in 2017. Reciprocal disenchantment is creating geopolitical questions for both nations. Iran had indicated withdrawal of special privileges to India if other oil importers were to be patronised. A possible casualty has been the Chabahar port (Soami, 2019).

### **2. Connectivity**

An important aspect of India's engagement with Iran was the building of the Chabahar port. This gives India access to the International North South Transit Corridor (INSTC) (Kashyap, 2018). India and Iran agreed to develop this port in January 2003. The agreement to build this port was signed between India, Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016. This gives Iran and Afghanistan a port that bypasses Pakistan. India too benefits from this arrangement. There had been a fourteen year delay in the construction of the port due to prior sanctions imposed on Iran's nuclear programme. The JCPOA agreement reached between Iran with China, France, Russia, USA and UK, along with Germany (P5+1) facilitated removal of sanctions. Thereafter, work on the port commenced (Bahal, 2017). Given the withdrawal of the USA from the JCPOA, Chabahar has once again run into trouble. This would also impact proposed Japanese investment in that port (Singh, 2020). Another concern with Chabahar is the possibility of China getting involved were India to dither from its commitments (Valiathan, 2020).

### **3. Chabahar-Zahedan Railway Line**

A key facet of this project is the Chabahar-Zahedan railway line. This would connect India with Afghanistan. There have been varying reports on whether Iran had dropped India from the railway line construction (Passi & Shah, 2020). According to the Iranian Embassy in India, the US sanctions made it difficult for India to participate in these ventures. However, they claim that Iran continues to welcome India's involvement (The Hindu, 2020). The latest statement by the Government of India points to India's continued involvement (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

### **4. Maritime Relations**

There have in the past been port calls by Indian and Iranian ships at each other's ports (Indian Navy, 2019). However, Iran has for long not wanted a long term Indian naval presence in the region (Singh, 2017). It is not clear as to how active the Indian Navy will be in the region.

### **5. Foreign Minister Visit**

The Iranian foreign minister recently visited India for the Indian Ocean Region Defence Ministers' Conclave on the side lines of Aero India 2021 (Press Information Bureau, 2021). Brig General Amir Hatami called the invitation for Tehran to attend the Indian Ocean Region defence ministers' meet as a "turning point" for India and Iran, calling the bilateral standing at a "good level" (Taneja, 2021).

### **Other Major Powers in Iran**

There are other regional powers that are engaged with Iran. The main ones are China and Russia.

#### **1. China Factor in Iran**

After the 2016, JCPOA deal China has increased involvement in Iran. There is also common interest in the BRI (Forough, 2020). China and Iran have signed a Comprehensive Joint Strategic Partnership. This includes cooperation on defence and energy. There are several commonalities that facilitate interests of both countries (Forough, 2020, p. 22). Indian scholars too see the increased sway of China as a threat to India's interest in Iran (Singh, 2020).

## 2. Russia Factor in Iran

The latest maritime exercise was held jointly with Russia and Iran (Ministry of Defence of Russian Federation, 2021). There is convergence between the two countries on several issues including expansion of NATO, the spread of terrorism, destabilisation of the Central Asian and South Caucasian nations and rebuilding and stabilisation of Afghanistan. Another shared interest is energy and gas exploration. Russia has provided military technology to Iran. There is a military cooperation agreement on deeper cooperation in the field of counterterrorism, exchanges of military personnel for training purposes and an increase in the number of reciprocal visits by the Iranian and Russian leaders. The Russian position *vis-à-vis* Iran is influenced by its relations with the west and NATO. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA nuclear deal is effectively driving Iran towards Russia (Sharma, 2018, pp. 135-136). India had a close association with the erstwhile Soviet Union in the Cold War era. There is currently a treaty between India and Russia (Ministry of External Affairs, 2004). There is continued cooperation in defence sales and research and development. This builds on the earlier defence relationship with the Soviet Union (Upadhyaya, 2018, pp. 208-212). The Russian and Indian Navies hold the biennial Exercise INDRA since 2003 (Athreya, 2020, p. 54). At the larger Indo-Pacific level, Russia is not keen for any kind of alliance that will mirror Cold War alliances (Koldunova, 2019). One issue with Russia is its increased closeness to China (Singh, 2019). India and Russia have a Reciprocal Logistics Support Agreement that will give rights for mutual use of ports and bases (Press Information Bureau, 2019).

## Other Gulf States

India has relations with all six GCC states, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These need to be examined to better understand the

scenario involving Iran. From the Indian point of view there is also the China factor involved with these countries.

## **1. Bahrain**

India has economic ties with Bahrain. The United States Fifth Fleet is located here. Indian Navy representative has recently been located at the USCENTOM headquarters in Bahrain. This is hoped to augment ties. Bahrain has low engagement with China since the US is a major presence in this country (Upadhyaya, 2019, p. 29). The UK has a Naval Support Facility at Mina Salman port in Bahrain (Royal Navy, 2018).

## **2. Kuwait**

Kuwait and India have economic and energy ties. There are also refuelling facilities for Indian Navy ships. There are defence ties with NATO. Kuwait is also a close economic partner of China (Upadhyaya, 2019, pp. 30-31).

## **3. Oman**

In 2016, the two countries signed a MoU for cooperation on maritime security. The Royal Oman Navy and Indian Navy have held the exercise NASEEM-AL-BAHR since 2007. Oman has recently permitted India to use Duqm port. There is also an MoU with the Indian Coast Guard (Indian Coast Guard, 2018). In 2018 at a bilateral meeting the joint statement endorsed cooperation in maritime security, terrorism, space, and energy security (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). Oman supports India's anti-piracy patrols. The UK maintains a maritime presence in Oman. There is joint exercise with France and USA (Upadhyaya, 2019, pp. 31-32; Royal Navy, 2021). Oman hitherto had energy trade with China, but due to Oman joining the BRI there is enhanced economic cooperation. There is also maritime cooperation including logistic support for anti-piracy patrols. There is common strategic interest that makes the association thrive. An open question is as to how Oman will balance relations with India. There are suggestions for India to maintain a high level of military diplomacy (Upadhyaya, 2019, pp. 31-32).

#### 4. Qatar

Qatar is the supplier of LNG to India. Qatar has close economic and military ties with India. There is training and technical cooperation between the two navies. Ship visits have been carried out by the Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard to Qatar. There are also participations in defence exhibitions (Upadhyaya, 2019, pp. 32-33). Qatar and the United States also have close defence ties. The Forward Headquarters of the USCENTCOM is located at Doha. There are also joint exercises of the two navies. The US was long keen to solve the rift between Qatar and the GCC to build a coalition of GCC with Egypt and Jordan against Iran (Upadhyaya, 2019, p. 33). Some scholars believe that the dispute was due to poor handling of the region by the US under Trump. Qatar was able to withstand the blockade due to its ties with Turkey, Iran and West (Stephens, 2021). At the forty first GCC summit at Riyadh, Qatar has been readmitted (GCC Summit 41, 2021). India had maintained neutrality during the GCC-Qatar standoff during 2017-2021 (Upadhyaya, 2019, p. 32). Qatar is the second largest supplier of natural gas to China. Qatar and China held a strategic-level dialogue in Beijing to explore areas for cooperation, including an operational plan for BRI. There are major investments by the Qatari sovereign wealth fund in China. Reportedly, Qatar has also covertly procured SY-400 short-range ballistic missiles from China. China has maintained neutrality in the GCC tensions (Upadhyaya, 2019, p. 32).

#### 5. Saudi Arabia

India and Saudi Arabia signed an MoU on Defence Cooperation in 2014 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2014). In April 2016 five new bilateral agreements covering intelligence-sharing on the financing of terrorism, increasing private investment, and enhancing defence cooperation, were signed (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016). The two countries have been engaged in training and capacity building exercises and hydrographic cooperation. The Royal Saudi naval forces have reportedly stepped enhanced naval engagements with the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard. Indian ships undertaking several goodwill visits to Saudi ports since the early 2000s. There are indications that Saudi Arabia is keen to enhance security cooperation with India in the Western Indian Ocean. Joint exercises are reported to be planned for late 2021. Several Saudi officers are trained in India's military academies. There are also plans for enhancing cooperation on defence production (Pillai, 2021). Most recently the Chief of Army Staff Gen M.M. Naravane made a trip to Saudi Arabia (Press Information Bureau, 2020). This is seen as boosting defence ties (Taneja, 2020). Saudi Arabia

is the major supplier of oil to China. In 2016 they two countries entered a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership to include cooperation in economic, political and military fields. Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has sought to diversify its economy, as outlined in the Saudi “Vision 2030” and has expressed interest in the BRI, which could potentially provide new opportunities for growth and investments. There are discussions on defence manufacturing. Saudi Arabia is reportedly keen to finance parts of the CPEC. Saudi Arabia is clearly keen to expand its diplomatic alliances beyond the United States. There is the possibility of greater China-Saudi cooperation and strategic influence in years to come. China may overtake India as a partner of Saudi Arabia. However, Saudi may be keen to balance ties with India and China, while continuing to be close to the United States (Upadhyaya, 2019, p. 35).

## **6. United Arab Emirates (UAE)**

In the past few years there have been several mutual visits at the head of state level. After the 2015 joint statement there is close cooperation of defence including maritime security (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). This is still continuing (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). India’s security cooperation with UAE comprises defence exports, intelligence, counterterrorism, ship visits, combined naval exercises, staff talks and training assistance (Upadhyaya, 2019, p. 36; Embassy of India, 2020). The first Ex GULF STAR 1 was held in 2018. There is participation in exhibitions (Indian Navy, 2021). Most recently the Chief of Army Staff Gen M.M. Naravane made a trip to the UAE (Press Information Bureau, 2020). This is seen as boosting defence ties (Taneja, 2020). There are also plans for France to join the UAE and India in joint Naval Exercises (Pillai, A Proactive Indian Navy: Upcoming Naval Exercises, 2021). It is however not clear if UAE actually joined Ex VARUNA 2021. At a diplomatic level UAE has supported India against Pakistan. There is also a deterioration of relations between UAE and Pakistan (Upadhyaya, 2019, p. 37). China and UAE have a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership since July 2018. There have been several trade delegation visits. There are substantial economic relations between the two countries. However, given the lack of defence ties, it is unlikely to encroach on India’s strategic ties with UAE (Upadhyaya, 2019, p. 37).

## **International Organisations**

### **1. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**

IORA (IORA, 2021) could be said to be the closest to a multilateral body for Indian's Maritime Neighbourhood (Khurana, 2019). France was admitted as a member based on the Indian Ocean territory of Reunion Island (France Diplomacy, 2020). This was apparently possible only after Iran withdrew objections. This is seen as a way of Iran seeking French support with the JCPOA (The Wire, 2020).

## **2. Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)**

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an Indian initiative, was established in 2008 (Royal Australian Navy, 2020). It brings together 35 navies and coast-guards to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean Region (Athreya, 2020a, pp. 74-75). Besides Iran, France and the UK are members of this grouping. This too gives India leeway for mediation.

## **3. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)**

The International Atomic Energy Agency has been carrying out technical verification of Iranian nuclear assets (IAEA, 2020). Notwithstanding Iran's planned withdrawal from the deal there is a working agreement on inspections (Al Jazeera, 2021). The IAEA believes that can be a return to inspections (European Parliament, 2021).

## **Indian Response**

India is clearly in the midst of regional tensions. It has responded based on existing doctrines and policies. Preserving relations with navies of the Persian Gulf is vital for India to hold its sway in the IOR (Singh, 2015). India has had joint exercises with several Gulf states (Athreya, 2020, p. 52). The two main aims are increasing cooperation and signalling intent to rivals (Athreya, 2020, p. 60). India has long followed a policy of Strategic Autonomy (Ranganathan, 2020). Based on these premises there could also be further responses.

### **1. Cooperation**

This article started by highlighting the ambiguity regarding India's participation in a naval drill along with Iran and Russia. There is already uncertainty surrounding Chabahar and the railway line to Zahedan. These are symptomatic of the underlying strain being put on the India-Iran relations due to the US sanctions. There may be little comfort in the fact that Iran is still open to engagement with India. The recent visit by the Iranian Defence Minister to India shows continued good relations. There are also issues within the GCC. Here too India has been seen as a trusted partner (Athreya, 2020).

## **2. Signalling to Rivals**

India has clearly not been successful in signalling to rivals. Notwithstanding the specific reasons India has been absent from Iran. This has created a vacuum that is being filled by China. China too has a massive footprint among GCC countries. Here too India faces challenges to keep up its position. Pakistan too is making inroads into the GCC region. India must be careful to stem this tide.

## **3. Neutrality**

The entire Iran crisis has challenged India's strategic autonomy. India has long been seen as a neutral partner by Iran, Israel and the GCC states. Currently India is effectively the largest country in the region that is trusted by the United States, Iran, Qatar, and even other GCC countries. It is also in India's interest for Iran to not join the Chinese camp.

## **4. JCPOA Revival Good Offices**

The major sticking point with Iran is the revival of the JCPOA nuclear deal. Iran is keen that the US lift all sanctions before any discussions. As a start some immediate measure such as unfreezing assets may be needed (Zamirrad, 2021). However, the US Middle East allies may not be keen on such a move. There are suggestions for mediation by the EU or European countries (Tabatabai, 2021). There are also suggestions for the UK to take this role and bring together Europe, US, and Iran (Tabrizi, Dolzikova, & Plant, 2021). This fits well with earlier recommendations for mediation between NATO and Iran by India (Athreya, 2020, p. 58). IONS and IORA further create a forum for negotiation. Given the recent change of government in the United States it is an added opportunity for India to play a conciliatory role.



## Conclusion

The current situation in Iran and the larger Persian Gulf has been a major challenge for India due to geography, regional issues, and extra regional powers. This has affected India-Iran bilateral relations. The US is the major extra regional power active in the Persian. It is also the main player with the JCPOA. The US withdrawal and sanctions have made it impossible for India and most European countries to trade with Iran thereby impacting on energy security. There are also issues around freedom of navigation, and infrastructure. In terms of IR Theory, clearly India has a Realist position. Thus, India was compelled by strategic considerations to follow the position taken by the main global super power the United States of America. India has not been able to uphold the much hyped Strategic Autonomy. There are still opportunities for India to increase goodwill overseas. There can be increased cooperation with all countries concerned. Iran itself is keen on a stable balance of power with there being no major external power. Assuming that the USA could not totally withdraw from the region, the presence of France, UK and India can be seen as a stabilising factor. Once again this shows India's position as a trusted party that follows Strategic Autonomy.

Based on the position of Strategic Autonomy, India is in a unique position to offer good offices to solve the current impasse with the JCPOA and larger issues in the Persian Gulf region. For one India is effectively the only major power that is trusted by Iran, the USA, E3, Russia and GCC states. Further, India has expertise in technological, military, and diplomatic spheres to make an impact. International organisations like IORA and IONS have a role to play in reconciliation with Iran. Given that France is part of these it can play an intercessor role between the P5+1 and Iran. The UK could take a role in these negotiations. As the lead in IONS India once again has a key role in this regard. India's emerging maritime relation with E3 counties would feed into the Iran negotiations. From the point of view of India, it has not been entirely successful in terms of maritime and other diplomatic efforts. There has been no efficacious signalling to rivals in the region. Effectively China and Pakistan have made inroads to Iran. Were India to facilitate a rapprochement between Iran, US, and GCC while including Russia it will do well to increase cooperation with allies. This would also signal intent to rivals like China and Pakistan. There are suggestions for Track 1.5 and 2 events to increase dialogue. India has think tanks and consulting firms that can provide this service. This seminar by COVINTS is an example of such a forum.

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