

Convergent Autonomy: A Comparative Analysis of Strategic Imperatives and Structural Constraints in Indian and Iranian Foreign Policies

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ABSTRACT: This research study offers a thorough comparative examination of the foreign policy frameworks of the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Iran, exploring their historical development, ideological underpinnings, and current strategic convergence. This paper examines India's "Strategic Autonomy" and "Link West" policies in conjunction with Iran's "Doctrine of Resistance" and "Look East" strategy, revealing how these two ancient civilizations maneuver through the challenges of an evolving multipolar international order. The analysis examines the essential factors influencing the bilateral relationship, such as energy security, maritime stability in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, and the geopolitically significant connectivity initiatives focused on the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The paper examines the "US Factor" as the principal structural constraint, analyzing how Washington's sanctions regime and evolving regional dynamics, including the Abraham Accords and the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, compel both New Delhi and Tehran to adjust their external engagements. Through an analysis of their participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the expanded BRICS alliance, the report emphasizes the subtle ways in which these countries reconcile ideological principles with economic pragmatism. The results indicate that despite considerable tensions about human rights, nuclear proliferation, and third-party alliances, a profound alignment of interests in Eurasian integration maintains a robust, if intricate, strategic cooperation.

Keywords: strategic autonomy, look east policy, chabahar port, international north-south transport corridor (instc), energy security, multipolarity, resistance economy, west asia.

I. INTRODUCTION

The international system in the mid-2020s is in a profound state of upheaval, with the established rules-based order being progressively challenged by the growth of new power centers and the resurgence of fierce great-power competition. In this unpredictable environment, the concept of "strategic autonomy" has resurfaced as a critical doctrine for middle and developing nations attempting to maintain autonomous agency.¹ For India and Iran, two ancient civilizations with modern aspirations for regional and global leadership, pursuing an independent foreign policy is more than just a diplomatic decision; it is a fundamental pillar of national identity and security.

India's understanding of strategic autonomy is profoundly entrenched in its postcolonial experience and the post-Cold War need to integrate into the global economy. Once defined by the Nehruvian policy of non-alignment, a strategy aimed at avoiding entanglement in the bipolar conflict between the United States and

the Soviet Union, Indian foreign policy has evolved toward a "realist mutation" known as multi-alignment. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India has strived to maximize its autonomy by engaging with all major power centers at the same time. This strategy enables India to strengthen security connections with the United Statesⁱⁱ and the European Union while preserving its "Pole Star" partnership with Russia and pursuing a "strategic conundrum" of collaboration with Iran. The ultimate goal of this strategically autonomous India is to serve as a trendsetter in international rule-making, fighting for the interests of the Global South while ensuring its route to becoming a "Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) by 2047.

In contrast, Iran's aspiration for autonomy is determined by the 1979 Islamic Revolution and a following history of systematic exclusion from the Western-led international order. The constitutional mandate "Neither East nor West" (Na Shargh, Na Gharb) represents a rejection of both Western imperialism and Eastern communist rule in favor of a strictly Islamic and autonomous course. However, the continuance of Western-led sanctions and the "maximum pressure" campaigns of the twenty-first century have necessitated a pragmatic reassessment. This has evolved into the "Look to the East" (negah be shargh) policy, which prioritizes relations with Russia, China, and India as a strategic necessity for the regime's survival and state stability. Iran uses its unique geography as a geopolitical pivot between the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia to position itself as a critical transit center for Eurasian trade.

The convergence of these two trajectories, India's proactive multi-alignment and Iran's reactive eastward shift, forms a distinct "convergent autonomy." Both states share a common goal in establishing a multipolar world in which no single power or coalition can dictate international rules. This convergence is most visible in their joint commitment to the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the building of the Chabahar Port, both of which provide India with a major gateway to Eurasia and Iran with an important economic lifeline.ⁱⁱⁱ However, this collaboration is bound by significant structural constraints. India's substantial connection to the global financial system, as well as its growing alliance with the United States, results in considerable sanctions compliance costs that frequently force it to curtail its contact with Tehran. Iran's increasing reliance on China and Russia, although offering temporary relief, raises concerns about its own full strategic autonomy. As instability in the Gulf continues and international sanctions are reinstated,^{iv} the scope for ambiguity in the India-Iran relationship diminishes, compelling both nations to reconcile their ideological ambitions with tangible practical considerations.

II. RELATED WORK

The study of strategic autonomy has progressed from traditional diplomatic history to a complex subfield of international relations theory that includes realism, constructivism, and role theory. Autonomy protected a new Indian state's sovereignty in a bipolar world, according to J.N. Dixit.^v Over time, this evolved into the strategic hedging paradigm, which scholars like Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi refer to as relative autonomy.^{vi} They contend that in a globalized world, full independence is unattainable; instead, governments must strive to optimize their mobility by balancing numerous interdependencies.

C. Raja Mohan has extensively chronicled the "Indo-Pacific" shift in Indian strategy, pointing out that strengthening connections with Europe and the United States acts as a buffer against the instability caused by a growing China and a weakening Russia.^{vii} This contrasts with the "multi-alignment" perspective, which defines autonomy as the ability to make independent judgments while staying inclusive and flexible in partnership selection, according to experts such as Shyam Saran.^{viii} Further insight is offered by Gopi Krishna Bhamidipati, who employs Kautilyan principles, namely Saptanga (internal strength), Samavaya (pragmatic alliances), and Asana (non-entanglement), to elucidate how India navigates its competing relationships with Iran, Israel, and the GCC without becoming entangled in their regional disputes.^{ix}

When it comes to Iran, academic writing talks a lot about the ongoing conflict between revolutionary ideas and practical statecraft. Perletta, contends that Iran's "Look to the East" policy constitutes a pragmatic reaction to the architecture of systemic exclusion and epistemic violence enforced by Western powers.^x Zamirirad underlines that, while the "East" was previously conceived as an ideological anti-hegemonic bloc, it has now evolved into a financial and geopolitical requirement for sanctions survival. Iranian experts at the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) frequently characterize their foreign policy as a drive

for a strong region and “Islamic internationalism,” portraying Iran as a protector of Global South interests against Western domination.

Comparative assessments of these two foreign policies frequently emphasize their mutual role as “pivot states” in Eurasian geopolitics. Brzezinski and Kaplan have both cited Iran's geographical location as an important factor in global power dynamics. Tekwani's recent study provides a key alternative, stating that India's relationship with Iran has “thinned” due to “routine compliance” with sanctions, implying that the rhetoric of strategic autonomy is increasingly challenged by the reality of Western strategic exposure. This results in a “strategic conundrum” in which the logic of collaboration remains intact but the ability to execute is limited by the external environment.

Multilateral institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS have also emerged as focal points for comparative analysis. Iran's 2023 membership to the SCO is regarded as a watershed moment in its history, establishing it within a “non-Western institutional framework” that enables trade through yuan-based settlements and barter systems. Scholars argue that while such engagement increases diplomatic leverage, it can also lead to overdependence on China, a structural vulnerability that hampers the quest of “full” strategic autonomy.

III. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research methodology used for this comparative analysis is based on the qualitative tradition of Comparative Foreign Policy (CFP) analysis. The CFP offers a systematic framework for analyzing how states make decisions by combining international system-level issues with domestic political and individual leadership characteristics. The study employs a “disciplined interpretive case study” design, tailoring the theory of strategic autonomy to the historical and contemporary contexts of India and Iran.

The key materials examined in this study are:

Governmental policy documents, including the 2024 Annual Report of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the 2024 Annual Report of the Department of Commerce, and official statements from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), serve as the foundation for stated policy objectives and diplomatic activities. Data for fiscal years 2024 were obtained from IRICA, the ITC, and the Indian Ministry of Commerce to quantify bilateral commerce and the impact of sanctions. Infrastructure Project Reports: Technical and political updates on the Chabahar Port (Shahid Beheshti Terminal) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) were obtained from project stakeholders and regional news sources. Scholarly Monographs and Journals: Examining the “Look to the East” policy, Kautilyan principles, and the notion of strategic hedging, peer-reviewed analyses offered second- and third-order insights into the causal links between internal ideology and foreign policy.

The analytical procedure took a “method of difference” approach, focusing on two situations that share a fundamental goal (autonomy) but function under dramatically different structural conditions: India as a rising, globally interconnected force and Iran as a sanctioned, regionally contentious state. The data was triangulated from several sources to highlight discrepancies, such as the disparity between India's vocal support for Iranian connection and its real compliance with US-imposed sanctions.

Levels of analysis used:

- Analyzing the leadership styles of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Presidents Raisi and Pezeshkian as “funnels” for domestic and international influences.
- State Level: Evaluating the impact of institutional entities such as the Indian MEA, Iranian Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, and local business sectors on foreign policy.
- Systemic Level: Assessing the impact of US sanctions, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on policy space.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

1. STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES: NATIONAL AND REGIONAL AMBITION

Geographical positioning and views of one's place in the new world order shape the strategic imperatives faced by both Iran and India. India's fundamental imperative is "multi-alignment" as a method of attaining great power status. This entails utilizing partnerships with the West for technology and security while keeping historical ties with Eurasia for energy and geopolitical strength. India's "extended neighborhood" policy prioritizes Iran as a conduit to Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.

Iran's strategic imperatives revolve around adaptive resistance and designed redundancy. Faced with structural marginalization, Iran aims to create a "strong region" by increasing ties with its neighbors and Global South players. The "Look to the East" policy exemplifies this necessity, prioritizing connections with China, Russia, and India to resist Western hegemony. Iran's geography enables it to serve as a "geopolitical pivot," attracting infrastructure investment that can help it avoid Western-controlled financial and maritime routes. Structural constraints include sanctions, compliance, and the shadow of the US. The most widespread structural restraint on India-Iran ties is the international sanctions regime, which is predominantly led by the US. Since the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, India has faced a "strategic conundrum." While India officially supports Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy, it has also voted against Iran at the IAEA and cut off oil imports in 2019 to avoid additional US penalties. In 2024, the reactivation of enforceable UN sanctions has exacerbated these strains. India's "quiet withdrawal" from deep economic involvement with Iran is indicative of its "Western strategic exposure." India is very connected to the dollar-based world financial system, so companies there would have to pay huge fines if they didn't follow the rules. This has made the relationship "thinner," meaning that it is only still strong in areas with clear exceptions or low compliance risks, like humanitarian help and some infrastructure projects.

Iran's limits are much more severe, resulting in a "forced" eastward orientation. While the 25-Year Strategic Cooperation Agreement with China and full SCO membership provide economic lifelines, they also introduce "structural vulnerabilities." For example, Iran's oil exports (which reached 1.3 million barrels per day by 2023) and its reliance on yuan-based payments make it hard for the country to have a truly independent economic policy.

2. INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY: THE CHABAHAR-INSTC NEXUS

The development of the Shahid Beheshti Port in Chabahar remains the strategic focal point of India-Iran collaboration. In May 2024, India Ports Global Ltd (IPGL) and Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) signed a significant 10-year contract. This pact aims to strengthen Chabahar's position as a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, successfully counterbalancing Chinese influence at Pakistan's Gwadar port.

Chabahar is inextricably linked with the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200-kilometer multimodal trading route. The INSTC is a "game-changer" for India since it cuts transit time to Russia by 40% compared to the Suez Canal. In 2024, the route transported nearly 26.9 million tons of total cargo, representing a 19% increase over the previous year. The "Eastern Corridor" (which connects Russia and Iran via Central Asia) has been particularly active, transporting over 2 million tonnes of commodities in 2023-24.

3. ECONOMIC AND TRADE ANALYSIS: TRANSITION TO NON-OIL SECTORS

Oil shortages have reshaped India-Iran trade. Although its purchases have decreased, India, which was once Iran's third-largest supplier of oil, is still among its top five trading partners. When the Iranian fiscal year ended in March 2024 (1403), the country's non-oil trade with other countries hit \$130.2 billion. India was Iran's biggest export market (\$1.90 billion) and biggest import market (\$1.75 billion).

Agricultural goods, pharmaceuticals, and chemicals currently dominate the trading relationship. Rice (especially Basmati) is India's largest export, valued at \$734 million in 2023. Iranian exports to India are dominated by acyclic alcohol derivatives (\$309 million) and organic/inorganic chemicals. Iran's non-oil balance, which reached \$14.6 billion in 2024, does, however, have a considerable trade deficit.

The economic connection is supported by sanction-proof mechanisms such as rupee-rial commerce and local currency settlements, with 96% of recent India-Russia transactions already conducted in national currencies, a model Iran hopes to emulate more generally with India.

4. MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT AND GEOPOLITICAL BALANCING

India and Iran have used multilateral institutions to assert their strategic autonomy and promote a multipolar order. The year 2024 witnessed major high-level engagement:

- BRICS Summit (Kazan, Oct 2024): Prime Minister Modi and President Masoud Pezeshkian discussed strengthening civilizational connection in a contemporary context.
- Iran's full participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2023 has created new opportunities for security and counter-terrorism cooperation with India.
- India's leadership in the Global South, including hosting the Voice of Global South Summit in 2024, promotes a development strategy that includes Iran as a key node in Eurasian connectivity.

However, India must engage in a "delicate balancing act." It is a member of both the "Quad" (the US, Japan, and Australia) and the "I2U2" (India, Israel, the UAE, and the US), the latter of which is frequently portrayed as an anti-Iran coalition. For this, India relies on the Asana (non-entanglement) concept, which states that alliances formed within one group should not provoke conflicts within another. At the height of Iran-Israel hostilities on June 13, 2024, India advised both sides to employ negotiation and de-escalation channels, emphasizing its "close and friendly relations" with both nations.

5. THE ROLE OF CHINA AND THE BRI

The growing ties between Iran and China represent a serious structural challenge to India's regional ambitions. China's \$400 billion, 25-year strategic cooperation pact with Iran offers Tehran investment and diplomatic cover that India, hampered by Western relations, frequently cannot match. China also operates the Gwadar port in Pakistan, which competes directly with Chabahar for Central Asian transit business. Iran sees its involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a means to bypass Western isolation. Between 2020 and 2023, BRI-linked logistics networks enabled Iran to triple its oil exports. For India, the "China-Iran axis" in Eurasia threatens to erode its operational space. Consequently, India's investment in Chabahar and the INSTC is not simply about trade; it is a "strategic necessity" to prevent the complete "encirclement" of South Asia by Chinese-led infrastructure.

V. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Indian and Iranian foreign policies reveals a fundamental similarity in the quest for strategic autonomy, despite the fact that the two countries operate from widely different power positions and face divergent structural challenges. For India, strategic autonomy is a proactive instrument of a developing power, showing itself as "multi-alignment" and strategic hedging. It enables India to maintain its sovereignty while navigating the triad of dependencies with the US, Russia, and the Middle East. India's strategy is guided by the Kautilyan principle of *Samavaya*, fluid, purpose-driven partnerships that value national interests over ideological purity.

For Iran, strategic autonomy is a reactive, survivalist posture based on the revolutionary concept of "Neither East nor West" but implemented through a "Look to the East" strategy. Iran's autonomy is weakened by its systemic exclusion and growing reliance on China and Russia, which, while providing an economic lifeline, generates new structural weaknesses. Its geography as a geopolitical pivot remains its most valuable asset, allowing it to remain relevant as an essential node in the Eurasian trade architecture despite Western sanctions. The bilateral relationship, which focuses on the Chabahar Port and the INSTC, is the pinnacle of this convergent autonomy. However, statistics from 2023-2024 show a thinning of ties due to external constraints. India's quiet withdrawal from Iranian energy and exploration of other pathways such as the IMEC reflect a recognition that its "Western strategic exposure" restricts the margin for ambiguity.

Finally, for both nations, maintaining strategic autonomy in a multipolar world necessitates a complex balance of relative autonomy and strategic exposure. As India pursues its "Viksit Bharat" objectives and Iran navigates its "sanctions survival strategy," the two countries will continue to find common ground in their shared commitment to a multipolar order, even if their practical cooperation is limited by the overarching structures of the international system. The ability to retain "flexibility and inclusiveness" in an era where distance cannot be assumed and strategic space must be jealously guarded will define their partnership's future.

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