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Focus: **Iran-India Relations**

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Burzine Waghmar has published extensively on Iranian, Central Asian and Silk Road studies, and has been a past contributor to the *FPRC* on Irano-Pakistan relations, *Studies on Iran*, 2013. Burzine Waghmar was invited by the Green Party, UK to deliver a public lecture on *CPEC, Climate Change and Balochistan: Pakistan at 75*, House of Lords, UK Parliament. In 2018 Waghmar was invited to deliver public lectures under the aegis of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Nehru Centre, London, *From Serindia to Sogdia: Indo-Central Asian Travel, Trade and Thought (AD 200-800)*, marking 25 years of Indo-Central Asian Diplomatic Relations (1992-2017); and *Karakoram Kowtowing in Gilgit-Baltistan: CPEC Equivocation and Expropriation*, European Parliament, Brussels. Burzine Waghmar has also delivered briefings at sessions of the UN Human Rights Council Geneva, all of which have now been published by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), Brussels.

Waghmar reads Iranian languages including Persian, Pashto, and Balochi. His Master's thesis submitted to Boston University was on the religio-political thinking of Ayatollah Khomeini and the evolution of the *velayat-e faqih* (vice-regency of the jurisconsult) in the period prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran.

*Views expressed herein are the author's sole prerogative independent of his institutional affiliations.*

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**1) How do you look at I2U2 in the context of India-Iran Relations? Is India abandoning Iran for a Western Quad?**

India never adopted much less 'abandoned' Iran. It does, admittedly, attach signification to its relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran (*hereinafter* IRI) as a heavyweight in its near abroad. But this was never anything like a 'special relationship' in the Anglo-American sense. Much is made in officialese by both republics of 'civilisational links': Indo-Iranian-speaking peoples and their proto-history, correspondences between Avestan and Sanskrit, the liturgical mediums employed by Zoroastrians and Hindus respectively; Persian as a *lingua franca* right through medieval and early modern India; and how India is the home of the oldest Iranian

diaspora, the Parsis, as well as the largest Twelver-Shia (*ithna asha'ari*) community of Muslims universally.

Insofar as the last point is concerned, Tehran has always acknowledged Indian secularism and the freedom enjoyed by the Twelver Shia, a point in fact noted by the late Hojatoleslam President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1934-2017) on his state visit, April 1995. Rafsanjani praised the Indian republic's espousal of 'secularism' to the resounding cheer of present Muslims, when visiting a *hussainiya* [congregational hall] in Lucknow, a leading north Indian centre of the subcontinent's Shia. Then Indian PM, P. V. N. Rao, broke protocol to meet Rafsanjani on his arrival at New Delhi airport. That visit was deemed as a highly successful one for Indian public relations with some even comparing it Premier Gorbachev's November 1986 visit. Rafsanjani even checked a Pakistani correspondent, when queried about Kashmir, at a press conference in the Indian capital. Rao was Rafsanjani's guest in September 1993, the first ever visit since the 1978-79 revolution by the head of an Indian government. Both had also met the previous year on the side lines of the tenth Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit, Jakarta. Another Iranian 'pragmatist' who partly shared Rafsanjani's worldview, President Mohammed Khatami, was the chief guest at India's 54th Republic Day celebration on his January 2003 state visit. Republic Day invitations are extended to only select heads of state by India.

India's ability to string along several bi- or multilateral relationships and display contradictory posturing, at least to foreign observers, is attributable to amoral expediency and ruthless transactionalism. The IRI is long inured of the fact that Jerusalem and New Delhi enjoy a profound defence-intelligence relationship. Hence Indian participation in the I2U2 quartet, allegedly touted as an 'Indo-Abrahamic alliance', is noted but glossed over to avoid mutual embarrassment.

## **2) Do you believe like a third wheel the US complicates India-Iran Relations?**

The US is neither a third nor fifth wheel. It is respectful of the fact that India maintains enduring, sophisticated sets of international relationships long honed during the Cold War (*read* non-aligned) era with several polities that Washington ideologically and morally disapproved of across eastern Europe or the global South.

I adduce a vivid example to highlight how India juggles several balls even at the expense of risking or annoying more important potential partners: a joint Indo-Iranian naval exercise, off the Arabian Sea, occurred on the eve of India and Pakistan state visits by President Bush, Jr. in March 2006. The timing was tactless on the part of the Indians. Indeed, the matter was raised on the Hill for discussions were underway on the Indo-American Civil Nuclear/123 Agreement, arguably the most important treaty signed since independence, October 2008. It might pique the interest of a certain sort of Indian long given to anti-western, especially anti-American, ranting to realise how Washington went out of its way to deny such naval exercises were undertaken and, when pushed, declared the matter overblown involving a mere courtesy port of call by Iranian vessels. The matter did not make a dent in the bilateral visit as the Americans have and continue factoring in Indian regional strategic interests with the IRI, whom it rightly regards as a proven and persistent threat to the liberal norms-based global system.

Let me conclude here with another instance of American goodwill during the ongoing Ukraine crisis towards its Quad partner: Ankara, unlike New Delhi, was slapped CATSAA sanctions (PL 115-44) for purchasing S-400 surface-to-air missiles from Moscow. Leftish Indian analysts and commentators are typically ignorant of just how American senators went extraordinarily out of their way to justify condoning Indian procurement pleading the country's long-standing dependence on Soviet-Russian weaponry could not be suspended forthwith, and that Indian security concerns generally, but during a low-intensity border conflict since 2017 on its vulnerable northeast border with an aggressive China acutely, must be recognised by the international community. No such plenary indulgence was extended to Turkey, a NATO partner.

### **3) How should India approach Iran, responding to the growing Chinese involvement in the country (Iran-China 25-year Agreement)?**

Iranian FM Mohammad Javad Zarif and People's Republic of China (PRC) FM and State Councillor, Wang Yi signed a *Comprehensive Cooperation Plan Between the People's Republic of China and Islamic Republic of Iran* at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, 27 March 2021/7 Farvardin 1400. (Noruz fell on 20 March heralding both, Iranian new year and the solar [*shamsi*] century 1400, designated by Khamenei as the 'year of production, support and removal of obstacles'). Earlier, the plan was finalised between FM Yi and Ali Larijani, ex-speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament, *majles*) and currently Special Adviser on the Sino-Iranian deal to the Supreme Leader (*rahbar*), Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

Antecedents of this partnership can be attributed to Premier Xi Jinping's 2016 state visit to Tehran. It was cleared by President Rouhani's cabinet on 21 June 2020. The signing commemorated 50 years of Sino-Iranian diplomatic relations. Pahlavi Iran had recognised the Guomindang-led Republic of China (ROC) government in 1937. It broke ties, as did the international community, with Taipei for Beijing in 1971. The late Shah, to his credit, supported Taiwan's continued inclusion in the UN General Assembly, unlike most other western leaders, who were quite prepared to abandon it for Mao's China which usurped Taiwan's seat in the Security Council and General Assembly. The ROC, British India and Pahlavi Iran were three among fifty founding members of the UN, June 1945. The Sino-Iranian treaty is of limited consequence. by reminding an Indian readership of the *Directive Principles of State Policy* enunciated in their Indian (also Irish) constitutions. It is long on idealised exhortation and short on enforceable action.

One surmised, after scrutinising this bilingual treaty in the Persian original, that both high contracting parties have conducted a cordial, non-committal waltz across the ballroom. The dance did not conclude with either side evincing matrimonial interest. It has been left as an open-ended engagement and polite noises between two domestically discredited regimes merely thumbing a nose at American unipolarity and performative, third world grandstanding. Iran did not offer the family silver, unlike CPEC Pakistan à la East India Company 2.0, to the Chinese least of all bases or hydrocarbon resources at depressed prices. FM Jawad Zarif was compelled to go on record, in the wake of criticism from some at home as well as Iranians overseas, to clarify we will not yield 'a handspan of Iran's soil to China or

any other country' (*Tehran Times* 18 July 2020, p. 2). Reza Zabib at the IRI foreign ministry's East Asia desk termed it a 'non-binding document' wherein is stated in clause 6 that: '... whether economic, political, or cultural it is not strategic and therefore does not contain any specific figures, including investment or resources. It is not financial and monetary.' (Translation mine.)

Here one conversely witnesses Iranian 'strategic autonomy'. Amicable relations with the Chinese necessitate overlooking Indian unease or apprehension. India knows better than to express its dissatisfaction publicly fully aware that others can also play the game. Both China and India, it may be recalled, are the IRI's largest and second-largest importer of crude oil respectively.

#### **4) How do major powers look at Iran's nuclear impasse? Is any international consensus still possible on this issue?**

It must be patently clear to all by now that President Trump was correct in renegeing on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement signed by his predecessor in July 2015. The contention among misguided leftist-liberals that bringing the IRI into the comity of nations and integrating its markets might modify its conduct at home or abroad is fatuous thinking. Iran seeks no rapprochement with the West for its very *raison d'être* is driven by unrelenting, radical hostility and, in the final analysis, futile attempts at amplifying its sense of exaggerated third world (Shia-inspired) victimhood.

The IRI, forty-three years on since its inception, is a regional and global pariah determined to carve spheres of influence in Yemen and Lebanon by arming and monetising proxies instead of rectifying its dysfunctional economy; finance Hamas and host Holocaust-deniers at officially-subsented conferences or cartoon competitions; attain 'strategic depth' by turning Iraq into an unthreatening client state (like Pakistan pursues with Afghanistan); support the Syrian regime in the face of Islamic ostracism across the Arab League, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); and foment riots during the most important Muslim event annually, the Hajj. If Iranians are not abetting coups in Bahrain (1981) or rampaging across Mecca (1987), their government is busy enabling Houthis to fire UAVs over Riyadh international airport and the Saudi defence ministry (2020). All in the West now acknowledge it was Tehran who attacked Saudi ARAMCO's Khurais oil field and Abqaiq refining plant thus halting nearly half of daily Saudi production output and 5% of global supplies in September 2019.

Iran, at the time of writing, has arrested 14,160 and shot dead 288 of its citizens since the anti-*hijab* protests erupted in September 2022. The death of a young Kurdish girl has brought all Iranians out in defiant revolt even as the regime mendaciously deflects blame on 'Zionists' or its own beleaguered Sunni minorities, Balochs and Kurds: security forces have shot dead unarmed mosque worshippers in Zahedan and fired rockets at Kurds into northern Iraq plus those within its border domiciled in Sanandaj, Iranian Kurdistan.

Iran has no compunction in killing its own never mind abetting the murder of civilians across not just the Middle East, where it harbours endemic rivalries and sectarian issues with fellow Muslims, but also Ukrainians by supplying Shahed-136 drones to Putin's murderous regime hence Iran is directly engaged in obliterating Ukrainians and their civilian infrastructure.

Iranian trainers and technical support are present on ground in occupied Crimea. The IRI's Revolutionary Guards Corp, after all, admitted the pre-dawn shooting down of a Ukrainian civil airliner taking off from Tehran killing all 176 onboard in January 2020.

There is no appetite to exonerate or accommodate Iran within the global community. It is not dictated by western but universal pressure for no liberal, genuinely representative government anywhere, and not just the western hemisphere, can condone a repressive, irresponsible regime determined to go nuclear and fixated on how Israel 'must vanish from the arena of time' [original: *az sahne-ye ruzgar mahv shavid*].

**5) The relationship of Iran with both Russia and India shows a dual approach of both "rapprochement and constraint." Do you agree with the view India and Iran could well play a major part in giving INSTC the required boost to reap benefits of resultant trade.**

Memories are longer in the orient than occident. Iran remains wary of the then Soviet now Russian bear and school textbooks still recall Russo-Persian wars (1651-1828) though there has been a move, since the onset of the February Ukraine war, to downplay these aspects in newer imprints.

The USSR and UK occupied northern and southern Iran in 1941 to prevent the Pahlavi monarchy falling into the hands of the Nazis. The last Shah's father, a modernising autocrat, was not wanting for pro-Axis sympathies. But Great Britain punctiliously exited Iran at the end of the war in 1945 whereas Stalin refused to budge going so far as to install a puppet state in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdish Mahabad (November 1945-December 1946). It was the first flashpoint of the nascent Cold War and Truman pressed Stalin to withdraw leading to the dissolution of this stooge regime just as others were emerging across eastern Europe.

The IRI has maintained a correct if cagey relationship with post-Soviet Russia. Putin's Russia has been hailed as a 'strategic partner' although Moscow is as unenthusiastic as New Delhi in seeing an eventually nuclear Iran. Both Russia and Iran, like China, are authoritarian states that perceive liberal democracies as a source of prospective instability given how their frequently noisy, forever interrogating, and sometimes subversive citizens routinely demand transparency in their governance. Moscow was, per the original JCPOA declarative, expected to be the recipient of surplus uranium from Tehran and Bushehr as well as provide stable isotopes to Fordow.

FM Lavrov is playing anything but a productive 'rapprochement and constraint' role. Putin is aware how sanctions have hurt a desperate IRI and Lavrov was not averse to stirring up matters by telling his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amirabdollahian, that the West and its media outlets are solely devoted to fomenting trouble in the Persian Gulf. Both regimes now reel under western sanctions so this was predictable. And both share similar security interests in Syria having tacitly acknowledged it will be a joint, not exclusive, sphere of interest. A 20-year Russo-Iranian Cooperation Agreement signed earlier this year has not exactly led to any tangible benefits. Selling S-400 SAMs and Sukhoi SU-35 jets to the IRI has been forestalled due to intense pressure placed on Moscow by both Jerusalem and Washington.

My understanding of the INSTC is that only three dry freight runs of this 7,200-km-long North-South Corridor (Bombay-Bandar Abbas-Baku-Astrakhan-St. Petersburg) were undertaken in 2014 and 2017. Connectivity costs and time between India and Europe were 30% cheaper and 40% less. The reality is markedly difficult even if promising on paper. It was meant to be operational by 2018 and that has not come to pass. With ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Armenia-Azerbaijan not to mention political instability in Iran, it is impossible to portend when this corridor will yield returns for Indian trade. Several auxiliary branches of the corridor are in works: Rasht-Astara rail line traversing north-south Iran which the Russians expressed an interest in funding remains incomplete whereas the Armenian Iranian rail network remains on the drawing board. Russian ultranationalists instigating tension in northern Kazakhstan of late may impact the smooth functioning of the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran network already in operation. Chahbahar port, handled by the Indians, is underutilised due to ongoing sanctions which have also affected Indian completion of the Chahbahar-Zahedan rail line.

I conclude here with remarks against those who criticised India for caving into American pressure and withdrawing from the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project in 2010. It is true India did so after signing the 123 Nuclear Agreement, but pricing and security primarily impelled New Delhi to extricate itself from this flop show. Once again it is imperative to highlight that the US was correct in prevailing upon India not to do business with Iran. Islamabad's Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) termed the deal a 'death sentence' for Pakistan which would have purchased gas at a disproportionately high rate suggested by the Iranians. Not that this was ever likely to occur since Pakistan had not begun laying the infrastructure along its side of the border for the pipeline. The Saudis both enticed and threatened the Pakistanis to distance themselves from this project. Insurgency-racked Balochistan, now also flooded, is the point from where gas would have flowed past Karachi eventually to enter India. Chronic instability and a complete trust deficit, following Bombay 26/11 with Pakistan, also loomed large which led India to walk away from this trilateral arrangement. The Indian left perforce needs to reconsider its customarily ill-founded and absurd imprecations of an 'imperialist' West.

India's future lies in the Quad as it comes of age, as the fifth largest economy seventy-five years on, after independence. Tokyo, not Tehran, ought to be prioritised in times to come as New Delhi alongside Canberra, but also imperilled Seoul and Taipei, confront a perpetual Chinese menace.