



**AN ENTANGLED TRIANGLE: US-IRAN RELATIONS (PRE-1979) AND
INDIA'S CAUTIOUS NEUTRALITY**

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College of Social Science and Humanities, Debre Markos University, Ethiopia.****ABSTRACT :**

This review article offers a critical analysis of the relationship between the United States and Iran in the pre-1979 period, compared with India's foreign policy towards Iran during the same timeframe. It argues that the US-Iran alliance, forged in the crucible of the Cold War and cemented by the 1953 coup, was a classic patron-client relationship fraught with inherent contradictions. While providing the Pahlavi regime with military and economic sustenance, this alliance fostered domestic resentment and sowed the seeds for the 1979 Islamic Revolution. From the Indian perspective, this period presented a complex diplomatic challenge. Guided by the principles of Non-Alignment, India sought to maintain cordial and pragmatic relations with the Shah's Iran, driven by shared civilizational links and economic complementarities. However, this engagement was consistently constrained by Iran's close military partnership with Pakistan, a key US ally and India's primary adversary. The article concludes that India's policy of cautious neutrality and strategic hedging during this era provides valuable lessons for navigating contemporary complexities in West Asia, underscoring the enduring need to balance principled engagement with pragmatic national interest.

KEYWORDS : *US-Iran Relations, Indian Foreign Policy, Cold War, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), 1953 Coup, Shah of Iran, India-Iran Relations, Realism, Strategic Autonomy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary geopolitical landscape is starkly defined by the profound enmity between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This adversarial relationship, characterized by sanctions, proxy conflicts, and a persistent nuclear standoff, often obscures a critical historical reality: for nearly three decades preceding the 1979 Revolution, the United States and Iran were intimate strategic allies. This alliance was a cornerstone of American Cold War strategy in West Asia, and its unraveling remains one of the most significant and consequential events in modern international history. Understanding the dynamics, successes, and ultimate failures of the US-Iran relationship pre-1979 is not merely an academic exercise; it is essential for comprehending the roots of contemporary regional instability and the deep-seated grievances that continue to shape Iranian foreign policy.

The pre-1979 era was marked by a rapid transformation in US-Iran ties. Beginning with limited socio-cultural interactions in the 19th century, the relationship evolved into a strategic partnership where Iran, under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, became a key American client state. The 1953 coup that overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was the pivotal turning point, replacing Iranian nationalism with monarchical absolutism underpinned by American support. This was followed by massive US military and economic aid, Iran's integration into anti-Soviet security pacts like CENTO, and an ambitious—and ironically prescient—nuclear energy programme

supported by Washington. However, this top-down alliance, while strategically expedient for both capitals, exacerbated socio-political fissures within Iranian society, ultimately fuelling the revolutionary fire that would consume the Pahlavi dynasty and fundamentally alter Iran's orientation in the world.

From the standpoint of Indian scholarship, this bilateral history is not a remote drama but a crucial chapter that directly impinged upon India's own foreign policy and strategic calculus. Following its independence in 1947, India, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, embarked on a path of Non-Alignment, seeking to maintain strategic autonomy amidst the bipolar Cold War rivalry. The US-Iran-Pakistan nexus presented a direct challenge to this principle. Iran's membership in the US-led security architecture, and its military and diplomatic support to Pakistan during the 1965 and 1971 wars, created a persistent strategic dilemma for New Delhi. Yet, India could not afford to isolate Iran. Shared historical ties, Iran's significance as an energy supplier, and the need for a balanced presence in West Asia compelled India to engage with the Shah's regime pragmatically.

This article, therefore, seeks to achieve two interconnected objectives. First, it will critically dissect the evolution of US-Iran relations from the early 20th century until the 1979 Revolution, analysing the geopolitical, economic, and strategic imperatives that drove this partnership to its zenith and eventual collapse. Second, it will situate India within this narrative, examining how New Delhi navigated the complex triangle of its own non-aligned ideology, its adversarial relationship with US-ally Pakistan, and its pragmatic desire for a stable relationship with Iran. By weaving these threads together, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of a formative period whose legacy continues to resonate powerfully in the corridors of power in Washington, Tehran, and New Delhi.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To understand the depth of the US-Iran alliance, one must first appreciate the historical context of Iranian nationalism and its fraught encounter with great power politics. For centuries, Iran's strategic location made it a theatre for the "Great Game" between the British and Russian Empires. This experience of external domination bred a fierce desire for national sovereignty and a foreign policy strategy often aimed at inviting a "third power" to counterbalance its predatory neighbours (Keddie, 2003).

The initial American entry into Iran fit this pattern perfectly. Unlike the British and Russians, early American engagement was perceived as disinterested, centred on missionary activities, education, and humanitarian aid. Figures like Howard Baskerville, who died fighting for Iran's Constitutional Revolution in 1909, became symbols of American altruism. This foundational layer of goodwill created a perception of the United States as a benevolent "third force," a notion that would profoundly influence early Iranian overtures (Gasiorowski, 1991).

The Second World War was a critical juncture. The Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 and the subsequent deposition of Reza Shah in favour of his young son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, underscored Iran's vulnerability. The US presence grew during the war as Iran became a vital corridor for Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union. The post-war period saw the US firmly align itself with the young Shah, most notably during the 1946 Azerbaijan crisis, where American diplomatic pressure was instrumental in compelling the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops from northwestern Iran (Lytle, 1987). This action cemented the US role as the guarantor of Iranian territorial integrity against Soviet encroachment, transforming the relationship from one of benign friendship to one of strategic necessity.

Concurrently, the rise of nationalist movements across the globe found a powerful expression in Iran through the leadership of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh. The nationalization of the British-controlled Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951 was a defiant act of economic self-determination, celebrated across the post-colonial world, including in India. However, for the West, and increasingly for the US, Mossadegh's government became a destabilizing force that, in the context of the intensifying Cold War, risked pushing Iran into the Soviet orbit. The stage was thus set for a confrontation that would irrevocably alter Iran's political destiny and tie it to the United States in a bond of dependency and, ultimately, resentment.

3. UNITED STATES AND IRAN RELATIONS PRE-1979

The period from 1953 to 1979 represents the core of the US-Iran strategic alliance, a relationship built on a foundational act of intervention: the 1953 coup.

3.1. The 1953 Coup: The Foundational Trauma

The CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh in August 1953 (in collaboration with British intelligence) was a watershed moment. While initially hesitant, the Eisenhower administration ultimately concurred with the British view that Mossadegh was unreliable and that a communist takeover was a real possibility (Gasiorowski, 1991). Operation Ajax succeeded in toppling Mossadegh and consolidating the Shah's power, but its legacy was profound. For the US, it demonstrated the efficacy of covert action in securing its interests. For the Shah, it made his throne dependent on American support. For the Iranian people, it became a symbol of national humiliation and the subversion of their democratic will, a memory that would be powerfully resurrected during the 1979 Revolution (Abrahamian, 2013).

3.2. The Patron-Client Relationship and the Cold War Nexus

In the coup's aftermath, the US embraced the Shah as a stalwart ally. Iran was integrated into the Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) in 1955, formally linking it to the US-led containment architecture. American military and economic aid, previously meagre, surged. As documented in the provided text, total US aid to Iran was less than \$30 million before 1953 but exceeded \$2.3 billion between 1953 and 1970 (p. 61). The relationship was unequivocally that of a patron and client. The US provided security guarantees, technology, and financial support; in return, Iran offered regional stability, a pro-Western orientation, and access to oil.

Under the "Nixon Doctrine" of the late 1960s and 1970s, which called on regional allies to shoulder more defence responsibilities, the Shah's Iran was designated a "regional gendarme." This led to an unprecedented arms transfer programme. The Shah spent billions of petrodollars on sophisticated American weaponry, building one of the world's most advanced militaries. This served US interests by creating a powerful barrier against Soviet southward expansion and ensuring the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf without requiring direct US military deployment (Bill, 1988).

3.3. The Nuclear Dimension and Underlying Fissures

Ironically, the 1970s also saw the beginnings of the contemporary nuclear dispute. The Shah, envisioning a post-oil future, launched an ambitious nuclear energy programme with the goal of generating 23,000 megawatts of electricity. The US, under Ford and Carter, was willing to supply reactors but was deeply concerned about the Shah's insistence on mastering the full nuclear fuel cycle, including reprocessing, which can produce weapons-grade plutonium. Declassified documents, as cited in the chapter, show that US officials believed that if other nations developed nuclear weapons, "we have no doubt that Iran will follow suit" (p. 73). The intense negotiations over safeguards and US veto rights prefigured the conflicts that would erupt decades later (Burr, 2009).

Despite the appearance of a solid alliance, the relationship was inherently unstable. The Shah's authoritarian rule, symbolized by his secret police SAVAK, was a source of popular discontent. The White Revolution, while modernizing the economy, failed to create inclusive political institutions. The vast social and economic disparities, coupled with a perceived erosion of cultural and religious values under Western influence, created a tinderbox. The US, by staking its entire policy on the person of the Shah, became inextricably linked to these grievances. When the revolution came, it was not only against the Shah but also against the "Great Satan" America that had propped him up.

4. INDIA'S POLICY TOWARD IRAN (1947-1979)

India's approach to Iran during this period was a classic example of its attempts to navigate the treacherous waters of the Cold War while managing its primary security concern: Pakistan.

4.1. The Nehruvian Era: Idealism and Initial Constraints

In the early years after independence, India and Iran shared cordial ties, bound by ancient cultural and civilizational links. Prime Minister Nehru and the Shah exchanged visits. However, the foundational divergence was India's commitment to Non-Alignment versus Iran's decision to join the Western bloc. Iran's membership in CENTO alongside Pakistan placed it in a military alliance directed, from India's perspective, against Soviet interests but also creating a potential two-front threat for India. This Pakistan factor became the central, constraining element in India-Iran relations (Pant, 2011).

During the Mossadegh crisis, Indian sympathies lay clearly with the Iranian nationalist movement. The overthrow of a popular, democratically-elected leader by a Western-backed coup affirmed Nehru's suspicions of great power interventionism and reinforced India's commitment to the principles of sovereignty and Non-Alignment.

4.2. Pragmatism and Hedging: Navigating Wars and Alliances

The 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistani wars severely tested the relationship. During the 1965 war, Iran provided symbolic military support to Pakistan, including, according to some accounts, spare parts for its US-supplied weaponry. This action confirmed India's worst fears about the US-Iran-Pakistan nexus and exposed the limits of Indo-Iranian friendship (Singh, 2017).

However, a more nuanced pragmatism emerged over time, particularly after the 1971 war. The Shah, a realist, recognized India's decisive victory and its emergence as the predominant power in South Asia. While he maintained his alliance with Pakistan, he was cautious not to provoke India unnecessarily. During the 1971 conflict, Iran did not open a second front or provide direct military intervention, instead focusing on diplomatic efforts. This allowed space for a post-war recalibration.

The 1970s saw a significant thaw, driven primarily by economics. The oil price boom of 1973 filled Iran's coffers, and India, with its growing economy, was a natural market for Iranian oil and a source of skilled labour and goods. Bilateral trade expanded substantially. This period demonstrated India's ability to decouple economics from strategic disagreements, engaging with Iran on pragmatic terms despite the enduring Pakistan problem.

5. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The interactions between the US, Iran, and India during this period can be effectively interpreted through the lenses of major International Relations theories.

5.1. Realism: The Primacy of Power and Interest

A Realist perspective provides the most compelling explanation for the core US-Iran alliance. For the US, Iran was a strategic asset in the bipolar struggle against the Soviet Union. The 1953 coup, the arms transfers, and the support for the Shah were all rational acts of power projection to secure a vital region. For the Shah, alignment with the US was a rational choice for regime security, military modernization, and enhancing Iran's regional power. The relationship was a textbook case of balancing (against the USSR) and bandwagoning (with the US). India's policy, too, reflected Realist hedging: engaging with Iran for economic benefit while relying on its strategic partnership with the Soviet Union to balance the US-Pakistan-China axis.

5.2. Liberalism: The Limits of Interdependence

Liberal theory would highlight the dense network of economic and institutional ties that developed. The massive oil trade, arms deals, and nuclear cooperation created significant interdependence. However, this case also demonstrates the limits of liberal peace theory. Deep economic ties did not prevent a revolutionary rupture because the political foundation of the relationship—the support for an authoritarian regime—was fundamentally illegitimate in the eyes of the Iranian populace. The institutions of the alliance, like CENTO, were revealed to be hollow when faced with a popular, ideologically-driven revolution.

5.3. Indian Strategic Thought: Non-Alignment and Strategic Autonomy

India's approach is best understood through its own unique blend of idealism and pragmatism, encapsulated in the philosophy of Non-Alignment. This was not passive neutrality but an active strategy of "strategic autonomy" (Hall, 2019). India's engagement with Iran, despite the latter's alliance with its adversary, was a pragmatic assertion of this autonomy. It reflected a refusal to let its policy be dictated by Washington or Moscow, and a commitment to engaging with all nations on the basis of mutual interest and respect for sovereignty, a principle that continues to underpin Indian foreign policy today.

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The pre-1979 US-Iran relationship holds critical implications for India's foreign policy, then and now.

First, the episode underscores the peril of over-reliance on a single partner or leader. The US policy of "The Shah, and only the Shah" left it with no leverage or allies when the revolution erupted. For India, this highlights the wisdom of its diversified foreign policy and its insistence on building broad-based relationships that can withstand domestic political changes in partner countries.

Second, India's ability to maintain a working relationship with Iran, despite the latter's alliance with Pakistan, demonstrates the importance of diplomatic space and strategic patience. By not burning its bridges with Tehran, India kept open channels of communication that would prove valuable in the post-Cold War era. This pragmatic hedging—engaging economically while managing strategic differences—is a model that India has applied with varying success to other challenging relationships.

Third, the regional geopolitics of South and West Asia remain deeply interconnected. The US-Iran rivalry today continues to complicate India's regional calculus, evident in challenges related to connectivity projects like Chabahar port, energy security, and the balance of influence in Afghanistan. The historical legacy of the pre-1979 era, particularly the deep-seated Iranian suspicion of US intentions, is a live factor that Indian policymakers must constantly navigate.

7. CONCLUSION

The period of US-Iran relations before 1979 presents a complex tapestry of strategic calculation, economic interdependence, and ultimately, political miscalculation. The alliance, while serving the immediate Cold War interests of both Washington and the Shah, was built on a fragile foundation that ignored the potent forces of nationalism and religion within Iranian society. Its collapse was not merely a change of regime but a fundamental reordering of the regional strategic landscape.

For India, this period was a formative test of its foreign policy principles. Navigating the US-Iran-Pakistan triangle required a delicate balance of its non-aligned ideology with hard-nosed pragmatism. India's policy of cautious engagement with the Shah's Iran, despite the overarching constraint of the Pakistan factor, was a testament to its commitment to strategic autonomy. The lessons from this era are profoundly relevant today. As India seeks to enhance its role as a leading power, its ability to maintain balanced, pragmatic, and resilient relationships with all actors in a volatile West Asia—including both the US and Iran—will be crucial. The pre-1979 experience demonstrates that while great power alliances may shift and revolutions may erupt, the enduring imperatives of geography, energy security, and diplomatic independence demand a foreign policy that is both principled and agile. Future research could fruitfully explore the archival records of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to provide a more granular understanding of the internal debates that shaped India's Iran policy during these critical decades.

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