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India's Interest in Iran-Afghanistan

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This article is based on editorial **"Delhi to Tehran via US"** which appeared in The Indian Express on 12 July 2019. It talks about the impact of the US's foreign policy in the middle east, on India's interest regarding Iran and Afghanistan.

Iran and Afghanistan represent the two pillars of India's regional foreign policy but because of the American strategy in the Middle East, the relationships and interests of India with Iran and Afghanistan are compromised.

Relationship between India and Iran got jeopardized as India, in order to comply with the American sanctions, had to cut its oil imports to zero. Also, India's interest in Afghanistan will be affected due to the hasty withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Thus Indian foreign policy needs to be more pragmatic.

What is the strategic importance of Iran-Afghanistan for India?

- India shared a cultural and historical relationship with both these countries, but since the start of the 21st century these two countries have formed the core of strategic attention of global politics:
 - **Iran:** A regional hegemon, asserts itself in the middle east flux and challenging US's dominance in the region.
 - **Afghanistan:** Since Operation "Enduring Freedom", which was US's global war on terrorism post 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan has been the centre of Great Game-involving all major power of the world.

- **Geostrategic importance of Iran for India:**
 - Iran grants India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia and can help mitigate China's growing influence among India's neighbours.
 - India is pursuing connectivity initiatives like the Chabahar Port, which is in sync with India's pursuit to reduce Pakistani influence in Afghanistan, combat extremist groups, and break a strategic encirclement by China.
 - Also, India and China are currently competing for influence in Iran.
 - Economically, Iran is a significant source of energy to India, as well as a possible avenue to access markets in neighbouring countries.
 - Iran is an important partner for its regional policy. As "an extended neighbour" sharing cultural affinities, it could help India to encircle Pakistan.
- **Geostrategic importance of Afghanistan for India:**
 - Afghanistan's main advantage is its geography
 - Anyone who controls Afghanistan controls the land routes between the Indian subcontinent, Iran, and resource-rich Central Asia. Almost every major power, therefore, wanted to play an assertive role in the region.
 - Economically, it is a gateway to the oil and mineral-rich Central Asian republics. Also, the massive reconstruction plans for the country offer a lot of opportunities for Indian companies.
 - Afghanistan has become the second-largest recipient of Indian foreign aid over the last five years.
 - India has become more and more popular in Afghanistan, not only because of its soft power, but also by setting up infrastructure, including hospitals, roads and dams, and contributing to the fabric of a democratic nation-state.
 - Apart from this, India had two priorities in Afghanistan:
 - To prevent Pakistan from setting up a friendly government in Afghanistan again.
 - To avoid the return of jihadi groups, like al Qaeda, which could strike in India.

How the US's policy in the Middle East impacting Indian interest?

- In light of Iran's nuclear program, Iran has become a state condemned and isolated by the United States, particularly under President Trump.
 - It is also viewed as a major regional threat by several Gulf Arab neighbors and Israel.
 - This has led to pressure on India, creating a tussle in ties with Iran.

- India is losing ground in Afghanistan, largely because of the USA's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.
 - The US promised to end the war in Afghanistan and withdraw American troops, but it is being done impatiently.
 - As a result, the American administration has intensified negotiations with the Taliban, bypassing Afghanistan's government.
 - The US is now prepared to withdraw troops in exchange for a Taliban commitment not to let Afghanistan be used as a base for international terrorism.
 - But trusting the Taliban to not disrupt the region is not pragmatic.
 - Further, Pakistan is now involved in the intra-Afghan dialogue by the US itself.

What should India do in this scenario?

- India should now upgrade its channels of communication with the Taliban
- Try to persuade Iran that cooperation between both countries is still possible.
- India will probably have to reassess its strategic convergence with the US because the US's foreign policy is acting against India's strategic interest.
- Last but not least India must realise that it is not easy to isolate Pakistan
 - Not only because of US duplicity and the China factor but also because of the tyranny of geography.
 - Indeed, if India-Afghanistan relations are so badly affected today, it's also because of animosity with Pakistan
 - In this scenario, India must think and act pragmatically vis-a-vis Pakistan.

As an emerging power, India cannot remain confined to South Asia, a peaceful extended neighbourhood(Iran-Afghanistan) is not only good for Indian trade and energy security but also plays a vital role in India's aspirations of becoming a superpower.

Drishti input

India's must reassess its strategic convergence with the US, as the foreign policy of the USA in the middle east is impacting India's interest. Comment.