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OPINION
EXCLUSIVE

When Iran experiences unrest, its impact does not remain confined within its borders; the repercussions are felt across Asia. The protests that began in late December 2025 with economic and guild-based demands were rapidly portrayed in international media as a sweeping crisis — even a sign of imminent collapse — largely due to the information vacuum created by a nationwide internet shutdown. The widespread circulation of unverified reports, recycled videos, and exaggerated casualty figures constructed an image of Iran that diverged significantly from realities on the ground. Once internet access was restored, it became clearer that a substantial gap existed between external narratives and domestic developments. The crisis did not remain purely internal. Following rhetorical escalation from the United States, it acquired geopolitical dimensions affecting countries such as India, China, and Pakistan. In this context, Indian experts have largely approached Iran's protests through the lens of mutual interests and strategic considerations. Unlike certain Western analyses that adopt a one-sided or interventionist framing, Indian analysts tend to emphasize regional stability, economic interdependence, and shared strategic projects — particularly the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor. Their assessments seek balance and relative neutrality, viewing Iran not merely as a site of crisis, but as a key component of Asia's broader strategic equilibrium.

On the late evening of December 28, 2025, all of a sudden, newspapers, news sites, and social media were filled with clips from Iran, breaking updates about Iran, and stories that seemed beyond imagination. I was also one of those who believed something huge was unfolding in Iran and that people had come out onto the streets to demand more than relief from a sliding economy.

However, I was soon proven wrong by the scale of misinformation circulating online. False reports, recycled videos, and fabricated demise posters spread rapidly across platforms, projecting an Iran that appeared to be collapsing in real time. The reality, at least initially, was more restrained. Citizens held peaceful protests that began with the bazaar community, shopkeepers, and merchants in Tehran's Grand Bazaar. University students soon joined, and demonstrations gradually spread to other major and small cities. But what stood out most in those early days was how quickly seven days of peaceful protest transformed into something far more politically charged. The slogans became sharper, more directly anti-government, and the protests took a completely different turn.

The flood of unverified reporting was not accidental. It was amplified by the fact that the internet was shut down nationwide. With communication restricted and official clarity limited, outsiders could not predict what was truly happening inside Iran. Yet videos and updates continued to circulate, often accompanied by claims of unimaginable numbers of protester deaths. It was difficult to verify anything, but it is also human nature to believe the loudest information available when there is no direct information from the affected parties. That is how the world perceived Iran's situation in those crucial early days. Fabricated reports from unverified sources became "legitimate" simply through repetition.

Only after Iran restored internet services was it possible to understand the situation with greater accuracy. Conversations with acquaintances present in Iran suggested that things were calmer than the external narrative had portrayed, particularly in Western media coverage. The gap between perception and reality was stark, and it highlighted

When Iran shakes, Asia feels it



FOREIGN POLICY

how information vacuums in closed or semi-closed environments can be filled by stories that serve political agendas more than they serve truth.

In the aftermath of this confusion, the crisis did not remain an internal Iranian issue for long. The United States of America, as it often does in moments of instability in West Asia, began to take advantage of the situation by framing it as a matter of urgent intervention and human rights concern. The irony of such positioning is difficult to ignore. Washington's record in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq has shown that its interventions frequently come with immense human cost, often measured in millions of lives disrupted or lost. Yet in moments like these, the language of rights and freedom becomes a familiar instrument, deployed not only to express concern but to justify pressure, sanctions, and coercive diplomacy.

Since the intervention and rhetorical escalation from the United States, the situation has shifted in character. What should have remained primarily an in-

ternal problem for Iran has increasingly been framed as an external confrontation, and in doing so, it has turned into a wider strategic threat for countries that maintain cordial or functional relationships with Tehran, including India, China, Pakistan, Russia, and others. The danger is not only the instability within Iran itself, but the way that instability becomes internationalized and weaponized through geopolitical competition. When it comes to India, New Delhi has historically maintained good relations with Tehran. Iran has been seen as a partner that was willing to supply oil at discounted rates, and beyond energy, Iran has long held strategic significance for India's connectivity ambitions. While the crisis in recent days has largely been framed as a confrontation between Iran and the United States, its consequences extend far beyond those two actors. India, despite appearing geographically distant, is among the most affected due to its long-standing strategic and economic engagement with Tehran. India has invested heavily in the devel-

opment of Chabahar port, and on May 13, 2024, a long-term agreement was signed between Indian Ports Global Limited and the Port and Maritime Organisation of Iran to operate the Shahid Beheshti terminal. This partnership was widely viewed as strategically significant for both countries, and for India, it represented something larger than a port project. Chabahar is closely linked to the International North-South Transport Corridor, a multimodal connectivity initiative that links India with Iran, Russia, and Europe. The corridor has already reduced transportation costs and distances, offering India more efficient access to Central Asia and Eurasia. Iran's stability is therefore directly linked to India's strategic and commercial interests.

Trade figures underline that this relationship has remained resilient even amid sanctions and financial constraints. In the financial year 2024–25, India's exports to Iran stood at approximately \$1.24 billion, while imports were valued at around \$0.44 billion. However, the current unrest has disrupted these arrangements. Operations at Chabahar have slowed, cargo movement along the corridor has been affected, and banking channels facilitating trade have come under renewed strain. Alternative mechanisms such as the rupee-rial arrangement face growing uncertainty, and Indian private sector entities have become increasingly risk-averse. For New Delhi, this represents a serious setback at a time when it is seeking to expand its economic and strategic footprint across Eurasia and Central Asia.

The crisis also worsens a growing trust deficit. Tehran increasingly perceives India as drifting closer to Washington, while New Delhi views Iran as unpredictable and strategically risky. At the same time, energy cooperation has been further constrained. Iran was once a major supplier of crude oil to India, but sanctions had already reduced imports



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US President Donald Trump (r) answers a question from a reporter at the end of a news conference with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at Mar-a-Lago, Palm Beach, Florida, on December 29, 2025.

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