



## WAR BETWEEN IRAN AND IRAQ (1980-1988): INDIA'S PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was a defining conflict in West Asia with profound and lasting implications for the regional order and international security. This review article, analyzes the war's origins, its brutal course, and its enduring legacy. It argues that the conflict was rooted in a complex interplay of historical border grievances, an irreconcilable ideological clash between Ba'athist Pan-Arabism and Khomeini's revolutionary Islam, and the personal ambition of Saddam Hussein. The war evolved into a grueling stalemate characterized by trench warfare, human-wave attacks, the strategic targeting of urban centers ("War of the Cities"), and the internationalization of the conflict through the "Tanker War." The article pays particular attention to India's diplomatic stance, framing it as a successful case study of applied Non-Alignment. It demonstrates how India, driven by paramount national interests including energy security, diaspora welfare, and the preservation of long-term strategic ties with both belligerents, pursued a policy of active and principled neutrality. Finally, the article assesses the war's long-term consequences: the empowerment of a debt-ridden Saddam Hussein leading to the 1990 Kuwait invasion, the entrenchment of a permanent U.S. military footprint in the Gulf, the deepening of the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide, and the strategic isolation of post-war Iran. It concludes that the lessons from this period—the efficacy of strategic autonomy and nuanced diplomacy—continue to offer a valuable template for Indian foreign policy in a volatile but vital region.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Iran-Iraq War, Indian Foreign Policy, Non-Alignment, West Asia, Gulf Security, Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini, Tanker War, Indian Diaspora, Energy Security.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For eight long years, from September 1980 to August 1988, two of West Asia's most powerful countries, Iran and Iraq, fought a brutal and bloody war. It was a conflict that shocked the world with its use of chemical weapons, channel warfare that reminded people of World War I, and attacks on civilian cities and international shipping. The Iran-Iraq War was not just a regional fight; it became a global issue where superpowers like the United States and the Soviet Union got involved indirectly, and neighbouring Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait gave billions of dollars to support Iraq (Bhatia, 1988). This was not a swift, lightning war but a grinding war of attrition, a total war that consumed a

generation of young men and the treasures of both nations, leaving behind a legacy of bitterness that continues to shape the geopolitics of the Gulf.

War happened in what we can call our "extended neighbourhood." The Gulf region is not a distant theatre for India; it is a vital and intimate part of our national security and economic calculus. The Arabian Sea has historically been a bridge, not a barrier, connecting the subcontinent to the lands of the Mashriq. This proximity means that instability in the Gulf has immediate and direct repercussions for India. The Gulf is our primary source of oil and gas, fuelling our industries and transportation. It is the home to a vast Indian diaspora, numbering in the millions, whose remittances form a critical stream of foreign exchange and support countless families back home (Muni & Pant, 2005). Furthermore, it is an area with which we share centuries-old cultural, linguistic, and civilizational ties, from the influence of Persian poetry and art to the ancient trade links with Mesopotamia. When two pivotal nations in this region embarked on a mutually destructive path, it was not an abstract foreign policy issue for New Delhi; it was a direct and pressing problem.

This article, looks back at that difficult period to understand how India navigated this diplomatic minefield. The main question we try to answer is: How did India balance its relationships with both Iran and Iraq during their war, and what does this tell us about the principles and practice of Indian foreign policy? To answer this, we must first appreciate the profound dilemma the war presented. India enjoyed, and had nurtured, strong ties with both belligerents. Iraq, under the Ba'ath party, was a key partner within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Indian public sector companies were involved in significant projects in Iraq, and Baghdad was a reliable energy partner. On the other side was Iran, a civilization with which India's connection is measured in millennia. Even after the 1979 Revolution, India had swiftly recognized the new government, understanding that state interests must transcend internal political upheavals. As noted by Indian strategist A. Behzadi (1991), "India's challenge was to avoid being forced into a binary choice, a scenario where supporting one friend would automatically mean alienating another" (p. 78).

The war, therefore, became the ultimate test of India's core foreign policy doctrine: Non-Alignment. In the context of the Cold War, Non-Alignment meant avoiding entanglement with either the US or Soviet blocs. In the context of the Iran-Iraq War, it meant a refined and active neutrality. This was not a passive neutrality of silence, but a dynamic diplomacy of engagement with both capitals. India's stance was principled—calling for an immediate ceasefire and a negotiated settlement under UN auspices—but it was also deeply pragmatic. The primary objectives were clear: ensure the safety of the Indian diaspora, protect the flow of energy resources, and preserve long-term strategic partnerships with both nations. Any tilt towards Baghdad would have been perceived in Tehran as a betrayal of a civilizational relationship and would have jeopardized India's standing in the wider Islamic world. Conversely, any sympathy for Iran's revolutionary cause would have angered not only Saddam Hussein but also the Arab Gulf monarchies who were bankrolling Iraq and were hosts to a large number of Indian workers.

The internationalization of the conflict, particularly during the "Tanker War" phase from 1984 onwards, further complicated India's position. The attacks on international shipping in the Persian Gulf threatened the lifeline of the global economy and drew in superpower navies. For India, a nation dependent on seaborne trade and energy imports, the safety of the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) became a paramount concern. The sight of US warships escorting Kuwaiti tankers, reflagged as American, highlighted the growing power vacuum and the willingness of external powers to intervene directly in regional affairs (Pant, 2004). This external intervention added another layer to India's diplomatic calculations, requiring New Delhi to not only balance its relations with Tehran and Baghdad but also to cautiously navigate the perceptions and policies of Washington and Moscow.

Two decades after the guns fell silent, a retrospective analysis is crucial. The Iran-Iraq War was a foundational event that set the stage for the subsequent conflicts that have dominated recent history:

the 1990-91 Gulf War, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and the ongoing tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear programme. The sectarian polarization that the war exacerbated has become a defining fault line in West Asian politics. Understanding India's successful navigation of this period offers valuable lessons for contemporary policymakers. As India's economic and political stature grows on the global stage, it will inevitably face similar complex situations where competing allies are in conflict. The experience of the 1980s provides a template for a foreign policy that is both principled and flexible, one that steadfastly protects national interest while advocating for peace and dialogue. This article will delve into the roots of the conflict, trace its devastating course, and critically examine India's diplomatic response, arguing that the nuanced neutrality maintained by New Delhi was a significant, if understated, achievement in Indian foreign policy.

## **2. THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT: MORE THAN A BORDER DISPUTE**

To understand the Iran-Iraq War, we must look beyond the immediate reason. While the fight over the Shatt al-Arab waterway was the official trigger, the real reasons were woven into a complex arras of historical grievance, ideological fervour, and raw political ambition. The war was not an accidental border skirmish that escalated; it was a conflict waiting for a pretext, a culmination of decades of mutual suspicion that was brought to a boil by the seismic events of 1979. As Indian scholar H.S. Bhatia (1988) aptly described it, the war was "a fire that had long been smoldering beneath the sands of the Gulf, ignited by the twin sparks of revolution and ambition" (p. 34). From an Indian vantage point, analysing these deep-seated causes is crucial to understanding not only the conflict itself but also the enduring fault lines in West Asian politics that continue to challenge Indian diplomacy today.

### **2.1 Historical Grievances: The Shatt al-Arab Dispute and the Weight of the Past**

The Shatt al-Arab waterway is far more than a geographical feature; it is a symbol of national sovereignty and economic survival for both Iran and Iraq. Formed by the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq, it flows for 200 kilometres before emptying into the Persian Gulf, serving as the critical outlet for both nations' oil exports. The dispute over its control is a legacy of colonial map-making. The 1847 Second Treaty of Erzurum, mediated by the British and Russian empires, first attempted to define the Ottoman-Persian frontier, largely favouring the Ottomans (the predecessors to modern Iraq) with control over most of the river. This colonial-era imposition created a grievance that would fester for over a century (Menon, 1992).

The core of the dispute was the principle of the boundary. Iraq, inheriting the Ottoman position, insisted that the frontier ran along the eastern, or Iranian, bank of the river, giving Baghdad full control over the entire waterway. Iran, conversely, argued for the *thalweg* principle—that the border should run along the median line of the river's deepest navigable channel, a standard in international river law that would grant it shared sovereignty. This was not a minor technicality. For Iran, whose major port of Abadan and critical oil terminals were located on the river, being subject to Iraqi control over its maritime access was an intolerable strategic vulnerability. The Shatt al-Arab was to Iran what the River Jordan is to Jordan—an economic lifeline, control over which could not be ceded to a often-hostile neighbor. (Menon, 1992, p. 88).

The situation reached a critical point in 1975. The Shah of Iran, leveraging his military strength and US backing, provided decisive support to Iraqi Kurdish rebels, bringing Saddam Hussein's regime to the brink of a military and political crisis. This pressure forced Iraq to the negotiating table in Algiers. The resulting Algiers Agreement was a monumental victory for Iran and a profound humiliation for Iraq. Saddam Hussein, then the Vice Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, was forced to accept the *thalweg* principle, thereby ceding Iraq's historic claim to the entire Shatt al-Arab. In return, Iran agreed to cease its support for the Kurdish rebellion. For Saddam, a man whose political identity was built on notions of Arab strength and invincibility, the Algiers Agreement was a scar on his and Iraq's

honour. He never accepted it as a permanent settlement, viewing it instead as a tactical retreat to be reversed when the opportunity arose (Behzadi, 1991). The waterway thus became a tangible symbol of a deeper national insult, a ready-made *casus belli* waiting for the right moment.

## **2.2 Ideological Clash: Pan-Arabism vs. Revolutionary Islam – A Battle for the Soul of the Region**

If the Shatt al-Arab was the tinder, the ideological clash was the spark that set it ablaze. This was not merely a state-to-state rivalry; it was a fundamental contest over the identity and future of West Asia. The two competing ideologies—Ba'athist Pan-Arabism and Khomeini's Revolutionary Islam—were mutually exclusive and inherently expansionist.

On one side was Saddam Hussein's Iraq, governed by the secular, socialist Ba'ath Party. Ba'athism's core tenet was the creation of a single, unified Arab nation, transcending the colonial-era state boundaries. Saddam increasingly positioned himself as the modern-day successor to Saladin, the defender of the Arab world and its Sunni heartland. His regime was built on a foundation of Arab nationalism, where identity was defined by language and ethnicity, not religious sect. This was a particularly delicate project in Iraq itself, where the Arab Shia majority, with historical and religious ties to Persia (Iran), was politically marginalized by the Sunni-dominated Ba'athist apparatus. The state's secular nature was a deliberate tool to suppress Shia religious identity, which was seen as a potential fifth column for Iranian influence (Kumar, 1999).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran fundamentally shattered this precarious balance. Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution was not just an internal Iranian affair; it was an ideological declaration of war against the existing West Asian order. Khomeini rejected the very foundations of nationalism—both Persian and Arab—as un-Islamic constructs (*jahiliyyah*), arguing that the only legitimate political identity was membership in the global Muslim community, the *Ummah*. He explicitly called for the overthrow of monarchies and secular republics in the region, labelling Saddam Hussein an "atheist" and a "enemy of Islam." This message was electrifying for Shia communities across the region, and nowhere more so than in Iraq. Khomeini, who had spent years in exile in the Shia holy city of Najaf, had deep connections with Iraqi Shia clerics and their followers. As R. Kumar (1999) observes, "Khomeini's rhetoric resonated powerfully in the shrines of Najaf and Karbala, turning theological affinity into a potent political threat for the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad" (p. 47).

This created an existential threat for Saddam. The Iranian Revolution presented a rival ideological model that had the potential to legitimize the political aspirations of Iraq's own Shia majority, thereby undermining the very basis of Ba'athist rule. The conflict, therefore, became a battle for ideological survival. Saddam skilfully reframed this existential struggle for the Arab world, portraying the war not as an Iraq-Iran conflict, but as the "Qadisiya of Saddam," a reference to the 7th-century battle where Arab armies defeated the Persian Sassanid Empire. He presented himself as the bulwark defending the Arab world from a resurgent Persian empire now cloaked in the garb of Shia Islam. This framing secured him financial and political support from Gulf Arab monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, who were equally terrified of Khomeini's revolutionary export doctrine (Bhatia, 1988). The war was thus a clash of two universalist ideologies, each claiming the mantle of the region's rightful destiny.

## **2.3 Personality and Ambition: The Role of Saddam Hussein**

While structural factors created the conditions for war, the agency of Saddam Hussein cannot be overstated. The conflict is a stark reminder of how the ambitions and perceptions of a single leader can propel nations into catastrophe. Saddam was a product of a violent political culture, a man who believed that power was ultimately demonstrated and sustained through ruthless force and decisive action. His worldview was shaped by a deep-seated insecurity and a corresponding need to project absolute strength (Behzadi, 1991).

In the chaotic aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, Saddam saw a historic window of opportunity. He perceived Iran to be in a state of profound weakness. The Imperial Iranian Army, once a formidable US-armed force, had been decapitated by revolutionary purges, with thousands of its officers executed or imprisoned. The new Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was passionate but lacked professional military experience. The central government in Tehran was still consolidating its power, facing challenges from leftist and nationalist groups. From Saddam's perspective, Iran was a "fragile vase," ready to be toppled with a single, powerful push (Bhatia, 1988, p. 51).

His calculus was a mixture of strategic ambition and personal aggrandizement. A swift, victorious war promised multiple rewards:

**Rectifying the Algiers Humiliation:** It would allow him to tear up the 1975 agreement and restore Iraqi sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab, cementing his legacy as the leader who restored Iraq's honour.

**Strategic Dominance:** He aimed to annex the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan (which he referred to by its Arab name, 'Arabistan'). This would not only grant Iraq massive oil reserves but also cripple Iran's economy and give Iraq dominant control over the northern Gulf.

**Quashing the Revolution:** A military defeat would discredit Khomeini and the revolutionary ideology, eliminating the existential threat to his regime and, in his mind, securing his position as the preeminent leader in the Arab world.

**Domestic Consolidation:** A short, successful war would unite the country behind him, overshadowing sectarian and ethnic divisions under the banner of nationalist triumph.

Saddam's miscalculation was his failure to understand the mobilizing power of revolutionary nationalism and religious fervour. He underestimated the willingness of ordinary Iranians to defend their homeland, misreading the internal turmoil of the revolution as a lack of national will. He assumed the Arab population of Khuzestan would welcome his forces as liberators, a assumption that proved largely false. As A. Behzadi (1991) critically notes, "Saddam's decision for war was based on a cold, realist calculus of military balance, but it fatally ignored the intangible 'spirit' of a revolution, a force that would prove as potent as any tank division" (p. 112). His personal ambition and strategic misjudgement transformed a latent rivalry into one of the most destructive conventional wars of the 20th century, a conflict whose roots were buried deep in history, ideology, and the uncompromising will of a single man.

### 3. THE COURSE OF THE WAR: A STALEMATE OF BLOOD AND OIL

The Iran-Iraq War unfolded not as a swift blitzkrieg as Saddam Hussein had envisioned, but as a protracted, grinding stalemate that mirrored the brutal warfare of the First World War, albeit with modern weaponry. Its course can be charted through distinct phases, each demonstrating the tragic miscalculations of the aggressor, the ferocious resilience of the defender, and the horrifying human cost of a conflict where neither side could achieve a decisive victory. For Indian observers, the war was a stark lesson in how regional conflicts can rapidly draw in global powers and disrupt the economic lifeblood of the international community, with direct implications for a energy-importing nation like India.

#### 3.1 Iraqi Invasion and Early Stalemate (1980-1982): The Failure of the Quick Victory

On September 22, 1980, Saddam Hussein launched a massive invasion, with Iraqi MiG-23s striking Iranian airbases and armoured divisions pushing across the border along a 700-kilometre front. The initial strategic aim was limited: to seize the Shatt al-Arab waterway, capture the oil-rich Khuzestan province, and deliver a crippling blow to the nascent Islamic Republic, hopefully triggering its collapse (Bhatia, 1988). The Iraqi military, well-equipped and prepared for conventional warfare, made early gains, capturing the strategic port of Khorramshahr after a bloody, weeks-long battle that earned it the moniker "Khunistan" (City of Blood).

However, the anticipated quick victory never materialized. Saddam's critical miscalculation was twofold. First, he overestimated the disarray within the Iranian military. While the regular army (Artesh) had been purged, its remaining core, combined with the newly formed, ideologically driven Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdaran) and the Basij (a volunteer militia of often very young and old men), mounted a ferocious defence. Second, and more importantly, he completely underestimated the power of revolutionary and nationalist fervour. The Iranian regime successfully framed the invasion as a "Sacred Defence" (Defa-e-Moghaddas), a war for the very survival of the revolution and the nation. This mobilized a wave of popular support that transcended class and political affiliation (Behzadi, 1991).

By late 1981, the Iraqi offensive had lost its momentum, bogged down by stiff Iranian resistance and overstretched supply lines. The war entered a static phase of trench warfare, reminiscent of the Western Front. This period saw Iran launch a series of successful counter-offensives, such as Operation Samen-ol-A'emeh in September 1981, which broke the Iraqi siege of Abadan. Using human-wave tactics, where Basij volunteers, often teenagers, would clear minefields with their bodies, the Iranians demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice that the conscript-based Iraqi army could not match. As noted by Indian analyst R. Kumar (1999), "The Basij became the symbolic heart of Iran's war effort; their martyrdom was not just a military tactic but a potent ideological statement that demoralized the Iraqi forces and cemented domestic support for the regime" (p. 112). By May 1982, through Operation Beit ol-Moqaddas, Iran had liberated Khorramshahr and successfully expelled the last Iraqi troops from its soil. The war's first phase ended not with an Iraqi triumph, but with a stunning Iranian reversal of fortunes.

### **3.2 Iranian Offensives and "War of the Cities" (1982-1988): The Quagmire of Attrition**

With Iraqi forces pushed back to the international border, Iran faced a strategic choice: end the war from a position of strength or press on into Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein. Driven by a sense of divine mandate and the belief that the Iraqi Shia population would rise up against Saddam, Tehran chose the latter. This decision transformed the war from a war of liberation to a war of expansion and regime change, locking both nations into a devastating six-year war of attrition.

From 1982 to 1988, Iran launched a series of massive, but ultimately futile, offensives into Iraqi territory, with names like "Operation Ramadan" and "Operation Karbala." The primary strategy relied on overwhelming numbers. Waves of Basij and Pasdaran forces, motivated by religious zeal, would crash against heavily fortified Iraqi positions. While these tactics occasionally achieved tactical breakthroughs, they consistently failed to deliver a strategic victory. The Iraqi army, now fighting on the defensive and benefiting from shorter supply lines and superior artillery and air power, inflicted catastrophic casualties on the Iranians. The battles for the Majnoon Islands and the Al-Faw Peninsula were particularly bloody examples of this costly stalemate. The human cost was staggering, with estimates suggesting Iran suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties in these offensives alone (Behzadi, 1991).

A terrifying feature of this period was the "War of the Cities." Beginning in 1984 and escalating in several phases until 1988, this involved the deliberate targeting of civilian population centres with ballistic missiles and aerial bombing. Iraq, possessing a larger and more advanced air force and Soviet-made Scud missiles, initiated these campaigns to break Iranian morale. Iran retaliated with its own Scud missiles (purchased from Libya and North Korea) and occasional air raids. The psychological impact on civilians in Tehran, Baghdad, and other major cities was profound, leading to mass evacuations and creating a pervasive atmosphere of terror. As H.S. Bhatia (1988) observed, "The missile attacks on cities stripped away any remaining fiction that this was a purely military confrontation; it became a total war against societies, aiming to break the will of the people themselves" (p. 145). For India, with its large diaspora in the region, this phase raised grave concerns about the safety of its citizens, who were now vulnerable to attacks far from the front lines.

### 3.3 The "Tanker War" and International Involvement: Globalizing the Conflict

As the land war stagnated, Saddam Hussein sought to internationalize the conflict and cripple Iran's primary source of revenue: oil exports. In 1984, Iraq initiated the "Tanker War," using its French-made Super Étendard aircraft armed with Exocet missiles to attack ships loading oil at Iran's Kharg Island terminal. The goal was twofold: to strangle Iran's economy and to draw the superpowers into the conflict, hoping they would pressure Iran to accept a ceasefire (Pant, 2004).

Iran responded in kind, using speedboats and missiles to attack tankers belonging to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Iraq's chief financial backers. This escalation directly threatened the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, which by the mid-1980s accounted for a significant portion of global supplies, including India's. The attacks sent insurance premiums for shipping skyrocketing and posed a direct threat to global economic stability. This prompted direct foreign intervention. At the request of Kuwait, both the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to provide naval escorts for its tankers, which were reflagged with American and Soviet colours. The subsequent deployment of a massive US naval armada, including aircraft carriers, to the Gulf was a pivotal moment. It marked the beginning of a permanent, large-scale US military presence in the region that would shape geopolitics for decades to come.

The international involvement was deeply cynical. While publicly calling for a ceasefire, many powers, including the United States, the Soviet Union, France, and China, were actively supplying weapons to one or both sides in a lucrative arms bazaar. The US, despite its official neutrality and the later Iran-Contra scandal, provided crucial intelligence and financial support to Iraq, viewing Saddam as the lesser evil compared to Khomeini's revolutionary Iran. This period, as G.P. Pant (2004) argues, "exposed the hypocrisy of the international system, where great powers profited from a regional bloodletting while paying lip service to peace, their policies ultimately prolonging the suffering" (p. 98). For non-aligned countries like India, this demonstrated the perils of regional conflicts becoming proxy battlegrounds for larger powers, complicating diplomatic efforts and making a peaceful resolution even more elusive.

### 3.4 The End: A Return to the Status Quo – Exhaustion and Acceptance

By 1988, both nations were utterly exhausted. Iran was reeling from the colossal human losses, a crumbling economy under the weight of the war effort, and increasing international isolation. A critical turning point was Iraq's resumption of widespread chemical weapons use, particularly during the battles to recapture the Al-Faw Peninsula in April 1988. These attacks, which included nerve agents, broke the spirit of the Iranian forces and demonstrated a horrifying new level of brutality that the world largely condemned but did little to stop (Kumar, 1999).

Meanwhile, Iraq, buoyed by billions of dollars in aid from the Gulf Arab states and receiving advanced weaponry and satellite intelligence from the West, had rebuilt its military into a formidable force. In a series of swift, well-executed offensives in the spring and summer of 1988, the Iraqi army pushed the Iranians back across the border. The strategic balance had decisively shifted.

The final blow came on July 3, 1988, when the USS Vincennes, operating in the tense waters of the Gulf, mistakenly shot down Iran Air Flight 655, killing all 290 civilians on board. This tragedy, perceived by the Iranian leadership as a deliberate and hostile act by a US navy that was already engaged in skirmishes with Iranian forces, convinced Ayatollah Khomeini that the war could not be won. He likened the decision to accept a ceasefire to "drinking from a poisoned chalice," but on July 18, 1988, Iran formally accepted UN Security Council Resolution 598, which it had previously stalled on. The war ended on August 20, 1988, with a ceasefire that essentially restored the pre-war borders. The Shatt al-Arab dispute remained unresolved. The conflict concluded not with a victor's peace, but with the mutual exhaustion of two nations, leaving behind a legacy of a million dead, millions more wounded and displaced, and a region poisoned by bitterness and laden with weapons, setting the stage for the next decade of conflict.

#### **4. THE INDIAN STANCE: NAVIGATING THE NEUTRAL PATH**

India's policy during the Iran-Iraq War stands as a case of its long-standing principle of Non-Alignment being stress-tested under the most difficult of circumstances. This was not the abstract non-alignment of Cold War summitry, but a practical, day-to-day diplomatic tightrope walk where a single misstep could have severe consequences. India had nurtured friendly relations with both belligerents over decades. Iraq, under the Ba'ath party, was a key and vocal partner within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), with robust economic ties to India. Iran, a civilization with millennia-old links to the subcontinent, had been a partner since the time of the Shah, and India, demonstrating strategic pragmatism, was one of the first significant countries to extend diplomatic recognition to Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic government in 1979 (Muni, 2010). This pre-existing web of positive relationships made the outbreak of war a diplomatic nightmare, compelling India to forge a path of principled neutrality that was as active as it was delicate.

##### **4.1 The Pillars of India's Neutrality: A Multi-Layered Calculation**

India's steadfastly neutral stance was not born of indecision, but was the product of a careful and layered calculation based on four interconnected pillars of national interest.

###### **1. The Principle of Non-Alignment in a Bipolar Context:**

In the heightened geopolitics of the early 1980s, the Iran-Iraq War threatened to draw in the superpowers. The United States, still reeling from the hostage crisis, was viscerally hostile to Iran, while the Soviet Union, though having a friendship treaty with Iraq, was also wary of Khomeini's Islamist ideology. For India, a founding member of NAM, taking sides would have meant being dragged into this nascent proxy conflict, compromising its hard-won strategic autonomy. As S.D. Muni (2010) argues, "India's non-alignment during the Gulf War was a declaration of its refusal to let its foreign policy be dictated by external powers or their regional proxies. It was an assertion of an independent world view" (p. 114). This principled stand was consistently articulated in international forums like the United Nations and the NAM, where Indian representatives uniformly called for an immediate ceasefire and a negotiated settlement, refusing to assign blame solely to one party. This consistency lent credibility to India's position, even as it frustrated both warring capitals.

###### **2. The Paramountcy of Diaspora Security:**

Perhaps the most immediate and compelling national interest was the safety and economic well-being of the massive Indian diaspora in the Gulf region. By 1980, over 100,000 Indian nationals were working in Iraq, primarily on construction and infrastructure projects, with many thousands more in Iran and several hundred thousand in the wider Gulf states like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Muni & Pant, 2005). These workers were not only crucial ambassadors of people-to-people contact but also the source of vital remittance flows that bolstered India's foreign exchange reserves and supported regional economies back home. Any overt tilt towards either Tehran or Baghdad carried the tangible risk of retaliatory measures against these vulnerable communities. Their lives and livelihoods were the human face of India's foreign policy dilemma. A strongly pro-Iraq stance could have led to the expulsion of Indian workers from Iran and jeopardized their status in other Shia-influenced areas. Conversely, supporting Iran would have risked the wrath of Saddam Hussein and his Arab financiers, potentially endangering the massive Indian workforce in Iraq and the Arab Gulf states. This demographic reality acted as a powerful brake on any adventurous diplomatic shift.

###### **3. The Imperative of Energy Security:**

Even in the 1980s, the Gulf region was the cornerstone of India's energy security. Both Iran and Iraq were significant suppliers of crude oil to the Indian economy. The war directly threatened this



lifeline. The "Tanker War" phase, in particular, sent shockwaves through the Indian establishment, as attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf caused insurance premiums to skyrocket and threatened the physical security of oil cargoes destined for Indian refineries (Pant, 2004). Taking a side in the conflict would have almost certainly led to one of these key suppliers cutting off oil exports to India as a punitive measure. In an era before India had successfully diversified its energy imports, such a cutoff would have had severe inflationary and recessionary consequences for the Indian economy. Therefore, neutrality was an economic necessity, a policy designed to keep the oil flowing from both sides, or at a minimum, to avoid the deliberate targeting of Indian energy interests.

#### **4. The Weight of Historical and Cultural Links:**

Beyond the cold calculus of realpolitik, India's stance was also shaped by profound civilizational and historical ties that made a binary choice intellectually and emotionally untenable. With Iran, the connections were deep and multifaceted—encompassing language (Persian was the court language of the Mughals), art, architecture, and literature. With Iraq, the links were rooted in the ancient trade and cultural exchanges with Mesopotamia and, more recently, in robust political cooperation within the NAM framework. As scholar A. Behzadi (1991) noted, "For Indian policymakers, choosing between Tehran and Baghdad was akin to choosing between two chapters of their own extended history. The civilizational affinity with Persia and the political camaraderie with Iraq created a diplomatic imperative for balance" (p. 156). This historical depth provided a moral and philosophical underpinning to India's neutrality, framing it not as amoral opportunism, but as a respectful acknowledgement of two deep and abiding relationships.

#### **4.2 Diplomatic Manoeuvres: The Art of Active Neutrality**

India's neutrality was far from a passive stance of silence. It was a dynamic and creatively managed diplomatic campaign aimed at engaging with both sides, mitigating humanitarian suffering, and protecting tangible economic interests.

##### **a) Multilateral Diplomacy and Peace Advocacy:**

On the global stage, India was a consistent and vocal advocate for peace. It supported all United Nations resolutions, including the pivotal UN Security Council Resolution 598 in 1987, which eventually formed the basis for the 1988 ceasefire. Indian diplomats worked the corridors of the UN in New York, urging both parties to lay down their arms. Within the Non-Aligned Movement, India, while stopping short of leading a mediation effort itself—a task it likely deemed impossible—consistently used the platform to call for collective action to end the hostilities. This positioned India as a responsible international actor committed to the UN Charter's principles, rather than a narrow partisan.

##### **b) Bilateral Engagement and Humanitarian Outreach:**

Perhaps the most delicate work occurred bilaterally. Indian ambassadors in Tehran and Baghdad were tasked with the unenviable job of maintaining open channels of communication, conveying India's concerns, and urging restraint, all while assuring each host government of India's friendship. This required immense diplomatic skill to avoid the perception of favouritism. A key element of this engagement was India's offer of humanitarian assistance. India supplied essential medicines, medical equipment, and other non-military aid to both Iran and Iraq (Behzadi, 1991). This gesture was symbolically powerful; it demonstrated India's concern for the well-being of the Iranian and Iraqi people, distinct from their governments' war policies. It was a tangible expression of sympathy that was welcomed in both capitals and helped to sustain a baseline of goodwill.

**c) Protecting Economic and Diaspora Interests:**

On the practical front, the Indian government worked assiduously to protect its economic stakes and its citizens. Despite the dangers of the "Tanker War," Indian shipping companies, with tacit government support, continued to operate in the Gulf, navigating the perilous waters to ensure the flow of goods and oil. Indian public sector undertakings (PSUs) and private companies continued to execute projects in both countries, albeit under extremely challenging conditions. The government also maintained a vigilant watch over the Indian diaspora, coordinating with host governments to ensure their safety, especially during the "War of the Cities" when civilian centres came under missile attack. While there were no large-scale evacuations, contingency plans were likely in place, and the diplomatic missions provided crucial support to the community on the ground.

The success of this nuanced strategy is undeniable. When the war finally ended in 1988, India emerged with its relationships with both Tehran and Baghdad not only intact but arguably strengthened by the ordeal. It had proven itself a reliable and steady friend in a time of crisis, a nation that could not be pressured into abandoning its principles or its partners. As Muni and Pant (2005) conclude, "The Iran-Iraq War was a defining moment for Indian diplomacy in West Asia. The successful navigation of that conflict proved that a policy of principled neutrality, rooted in national interest, could be a source of strength and respect, not a sign of weakness" (p. 255). This legacy of balanced engagement would become a cornerstone of India's West Asia policy for the decades to follow.

**5. THE AFTERMATH AND LASTING IMPACT: A VIEW FROM INDIA IN 2010**

Looking back from the vantage point of 2010, the Iran-Iraq War stands not as a closed chapter but as a prologue to the defining conflicts of the subsequent two decades. Its consequences have rippled outward, fundamentally reshaping the geopolitical landscape of West Asia and continuously influencing the calculus of Indian foreign policy. The ceasefire of 1988 did not bring closure; it merely froze a conflict whose root causes festered, setting the stage for new and even more destructive wars. For India, a nation whose fortunes are inextricably linked to the stability of its extended neighbourhood, understanding this legacy is not an academic exercise but a strategic necessity.

**5.1 Regional Consequences: A Legacy of Instability**

The war's conclusion created a deeply distorted regional balance of power, the repercussions of which are starkly evident in 2010.

**a) A Pyrrhic Victor and a Wounded Power:**

Paradoxically, the war left the nominal aggressor, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in a position of perceived strength but profound vulnerability. Saddam emerged with the fourth-largest army in the world, a battle-hardened force he believed guaranteed his regional dominance. However, this military prowess was a facade masking a catastrophic economic reality. The war had exhausted Iraq's foreign exchange reserves and left it drowning in debt, estimated at over \$80 billion, a significant portion owed to its Gulf Arab neighbours, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Pant, 2004). This financial pressure directly contributed to Saddam's fateful decision to invade Kuwait in August 1990. He argued that the invasion was a legitimate reclaiming of Iraqi territory and that the war against Iran had been fought on behalf of the Arab world, for which Kuwaiti debt forgiveness was a meagre reward. The 1990-91 Gulf War, therefore, was not a separate event but the direct and logical consequence of the political and economic distortions created by the Iran-Iraq War. The subsequent UN sanctions regime, which lasted over a decade, crippled Iraq's economy and society, setting the conditions for the 2003 US-led invasion and the chaos that has followed.

Iran, though it had successfully defended its territory, was a wounded and isolated power. The war cost Iran an estimated \$1 trillion in economic damages and over 300,000 lives. The experience of

international isolation—with most Western nations and Arab states siding with Iraq—and the repeated use of chemical weapons against its forces with impunity, convinced the Iranian leadership of a fundamental lesson: they could rely on no one but themselves. This fostered a deep-seated sense of victimization and a strategic imperative for self-sufficiency. As G.P. Pant (2004) notes, "The war bequeathed to Iran a siege mentality and a determination to develop indigenous military capabilities, including a missile program and, controversially, a nuclear program, to ensure it would never again be so vulnerable" (p. 101). This drive for strategic autonomy has become the central point of contention between Iran and the international community, defining the region's security dilemma.

#### **b) The Entrenchment of the US Footprint:**

The Iran-Iraq War served as the primary catalyst for a permanent and massive US military presence in the Persian Gulf, a development with epochal consequences. Prior to the 1980s, the US pursued a strategy of relying on regional "twin pillars" (Iran and Saudi Arabia). The Iranian Revolution knocked out one pillar, and the subsequent tanker war demonstrated the vulnerability of the other. The US decision in 1987 to reflag Kuwaiti tankers and deploy its navy to escort them through the Gulf marked a pivotal shift from an offshore balancer to an onshore guarantor of security. This presence, initially a temporary measure, became permanent after the 1991 Gulf War and was massively expanded after 2003. The establishment of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) and its forward headquarters in Qatar symbolizes this enduring commitment. For the region, this has meant that local rivalries are now constantly mediated, and often exacerbated, by the overarching framework of US hegemony, a reality that shapes everything from arms sales to diplomatic alignments.

#### **c) The Deepening of the Sectarian Fault Line:**

While sectarian identities have always existed in West Asia, the Iran-Iraq War weaponized them as a primary tool of geopolitics. Saddam Hussein deliberately framed the conflict in sectarian terms—the "Qadisiyah of Saddam"—pitting Arab against Persian and, by implication, Sunni against Shia. The Arab Gulf monarchies, fearful of their own Shia populations, bankrolled this narrative. In response, the Iranian regime mobilized its populace and allied groups under the banner of Shia revolutionary Islam. As R. Kumar (1999) presciently observed, "The war institutionalized sectarian identity as a currency of regional power politics, creating a template for proxy conflict that would outlast the battlefield" (p. 156). This template is now glaringly evident. In post-2003 Iraq, political life is organized along sectarian lines. In Lebanon, the rise of Hezbollah, a direct progeny of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps founded during the war, is a key factor. The ongoing political struggles in Bahrain and the Syrian civil war, where Iran and its Arab rivals back opposing sides, are all contemporary manifestations of the sectarian polarization that was given its modern political form during the 1980-88 war.

### **5.2 Consequences for India: Evolving Challenges and Enduring Principles**

The Iran-Iraq War was a rude awakening for Indian policymakers, forcing a recalibration of its West Asia policy that continues to resonate in 2010.

#### **a) Energy Security: From Reliance to Diversification:**

The "Tanker War" of the mid-1980s was a stark lesson in strategic vulnerability. The sight of oil tankers being attacked in the narrow Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of India's oil imports flowed, highlighted the fragility of India's energy supply chains. This experience was a powerful driver behind India's subsequent, albeit slow-moving, efforts to diversify its energy sources. While the Gulf remains our primary supplier, initiatives to secure oil and gas from Africa, Latin America, and the Caspian region gained momentum in the 1990s and 2000s. Furthermore, the war underscored the importance of building strategic petroleum reserves, a project India has now seriously embarked upon.

The volatility demonstrated by the conflict made it clear that relying on a single, unstable region was an unacceptable risk to India's economic growth.

**b) The Diaspora: From an Economic Asset to a Strategic Responsibility:**

The war transformed the Indian government's perception of its diaspora in the Gulf. The community, previously viewed primarily through an economic lens as a source of remittances, was now seen as a major strategic responsibility. The potential for a regional conflagration to endanger hundreds of thousands of Indian citizens forced the Ministry of External Affairs to develop more sophisticated contingency plans and crisis management protocols. The safety and well-being of this diaspora have since become a non-negotiable top-tier priority in all engagements with Gulf governments, a concern that was powerfully reinforced during the 1990 Gulf War evacuations and remains central to our diplomatic missions in the region today.

**c) Strategic Space: Navigating a New Balance of Power:**

The chain of events set off by the war—the 1991 Gulf War, the sanctions on Iraq, the 2003 invasion, and the rise of Iran—has continuously reshuffled the regional order, presenting India with a complex and evolving strategic environment. The collapse of Iraq as a regional counterweight to Iran has created a new power dynamic. India's growing strategic partnership with the United States, particularly after our 1998 nuclear tests, adds another layer of complexity. Washington's intense rivalry with Tehran often pressures New Delhi to choose sides, most notably over Iran's nuclear program. India's ability to maintain cordial relations with the US, Israel, Iran, and the Arab Gulf states simultaneously is a direct test of the diplomatic skills honed during the 1980s.

Today, in 2010, India's policy continues to reflect the lessons of that difficult decade. Our engagement with the new, post-Saddam Iraq is deep and multifaceted, involving significant financial and technical involvement in its reconstruction. Simultaneously, we are carefully nurturing our relationship with Iran, pursuing strategic projects like the Chabahar port, which offers India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan. This delicate balancing act is not always easy, and it attracts criticism from various quarters. However, the core principles that guided India through the Iran-Iraq War—strategic autonomy, a commitment to dialogue, and an unwavering focus on national interest—remain the lodestar of our policy. As we look at a West Asia still grappling with the long shadow of that terrible war, India's challenge is to continue this nuanced engagement, advocating for stability and cooperation in a region that can ill afford another decades-long conflict.

**6. CONCLUSION**

The Iran-Iraq War was a tragic and defining conflict of the late 20th century. For India, it was a test of its diplomatic skill and its core foreign policy principle of Non-Alignment. By refusing to choose sides and by actively promoting peace, India protected its immediate interests—the safety of its diaspora and the security of its energy supplies. The success of this policy is clear from the fact that India emerged from the eight-year war with its relationships with both Tehran and Baghdad not just intact, but in many ways, strengthened.

The shadow of the war is long. The regional tensions it inflamed are still with us. As India's global profile rises, the challenge of managing relationships with competing powers in West Asia will only become more complex. The careful, principled, and interest-based diplomacy that India displayed during the Iran-Iraq War provides a valuable guidebook for the future. It shows that in a complicated world, sometimes the strongest position is not to take a side, but to stand for peace and your own people.

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