

## India and Iran: New Delhi's Balancing Act

Since the end of the Cold War, New Delhi has been slowly but surely forging a comprehensive relationship with Tehran based on energy and commercial cooperation, infrastructure development in Iran and beyond, and purported military and intelligence ties.<sup>1</sup> Iran holds particular importance for India as it provides unique access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, two theaters in which India seeks to project greater influence.<sup>2</sup>

Curiously, the Indian-Iranian détente did not attract significant U.S. government attention until the fall of 2005 when, at the direction of President George W. Bush, Congress undertook deliberations to change U.S. law to permit a civilian nuclear deal with India. With the Iranian nuclear crisis deepening in the background, opponents of the deal reasoned that it would enervate the very global nonproliferation regime that was needed to compel Iran to halt fissile material production. Critics and even a few champions of the initiative were wary of the strategic and military ties that New Delhi and Tehran were trumpeting to their citizens while downplaying them to U.S. audiences. To allay these concerns, U.S. officials argued that India's ties with Iran are tied to the former's mounting energy needs. This contention justified the Indian-U.S. nuclear deal, which would diminish India's dependence on Iran, and facilitated the conclusion that Iranian-Indian ties are benign to U.S. interests even if they imply future policy disagreements between New Delhi and Washington.<sup>3</sup>

Although India as a major energy consumer certainly seeks a steady supply of resources, this one-dimensional characterization of Indian-Iranian ties is

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 30:3 pp. 145–159.

incomplete. The Indian-Iranian relationship has much more to do with India's great-power aspirations and New Delhi's concomitant expansive agenda for Central Asia and beyond, within which energy is only one, albeit important, consideration. New Delhi has a finely tuned balancing act to sustain. How far can India expand its bilateral ties with Iran while deepening and broadening its critical relations with the United States, Israel, and a host of other states that are wary of Iran?

### **The Nuclear Flashpoint over Iran**

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Critics of the U.S.-Iranian relationship and of the U.S.-Indian nuclear deal had reasonable grounds for concern. In October 2005, Foreign Minister Natwar Singh initially declared that India would not support U.S. efforts to refer Iran to the UN Security Council, flabbergasting key members of Congress.<sup>4</sup> In addition, two Indian nuclear scientists provided assistance to Iran's nuclear program. Both were eventually sanctioned by the United States under the Iran Nonproliferation Act of 2000, although sanctions on one were eventually dropped.<sup>5</sup> Some members of Congress were discomfited and even appalled by a second Indian-Iranian naval exercise, which took place nearly concurrently with Bush's March 2006 visit.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, India cast two votes against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). First, it voted for the resolution in September 2005 finding Iran to be in noncompliance, then voted to refer Iran to the UN Security Council in February 2006. These votes in some measure mollified those U.S. policymakers who were dubious about India's attempts to woo Washington and Tehran simultaneously. Although Indian and U.S. officials publicly nod to India's independent foreign policy, India understood that failure to support measures against Iran at the UN Security Council would jeopardize the prized U.S.-Indian nuclear deal.

As expected, India's votes at the IAEA generated considerable controversy in India, with opposition parties demanding that New Delhi's foreign policy resist the diktat of outside powers and asserting the votes as evidence of "the ... Singh government's shameful willingness to abandon the independence of Indian foreign policy for the sake of strengthening its strategic partnership with the United States."<sup>7</sup> Criticism of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh likely had three proximal causes: popular unease with kowtowing to the United States, widespread popular support for Indian-Iranian rapprochement, and the belief that Iran has the right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to civilian nuclear technology. Although many Indian commentators were quick to assert Iran's rights to peaceful nuclear technologies as delineated under Article IV of the NPT, those critics were silent about the legal interpretation

that once a country is found to be in violation of specific obligations of the NPT, as Iran was, those rights are forfeited.<sup>8</sup>

The Indian polity and leadership alike, however, have shown no stomach for a nuclear-armed Iran, although they support Iran's ostensible rights to civilian nuclear technology. Singh has consistently stated that Iran must honor its obligations under the NPT and, furthermore, that another nuclear-armed state in the region is inimical to India's interests.<sup>9</sup> Despite the media commentary condemning Singh's decisions at the IAEA, his government's actions were consistent with Indian public opinion about Iran's nuclear intentions. In a March 2006 nationwide poll, 64 percent of Indians believed that Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons and 77 percent are worried about this possibility. Furthermore, a majority (58 percent) wants the United Nations actively to discourage countries from acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup>

Indian respondents are more ambivalent about Iran on issues other than nuclear weapons, in contrast to other nations, which hold decisively negative views of Iran. In a March 2007 survey of 27 countries, respondents were asked whether Iran is having a mostly positive or negative influence in the world. Twenty-one of those countries saw Iran's influence as negative. On average, 54 percent of each country's respondents held this negative view compared to 18 percent who saw Iran's influence as positive. In India, however, 27 percent of the respondents saw Iran's influence as mainly positive, 23 percent saw it as mainly negative, and 50 percent said neither. Indians clearly do not share the world's view of Iran as troublesome, and one-quarter of them even see Iran favorably.<sup>11</sup>

At first blush, it may seem paradoxical that Indians tend to support Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology and support Iran in other ways while not supporting a nuclearized Iran. There are good reasons for India's ambivalence. Iran's nuclear program undisputedly benefited from the nuclear arms bazaar run by Pakistani nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan. One columnist captured this sentiment when he wrote that a vote for Iran is a vote for Khan.<sup>12</sup> Some Indians were irked by Iran's efforts to equate its own nuclear program to that of India, to argue that U.S. positions on Indian and Iranian nuclear programs constitute a double standard, and to deploy in Iran's defense the language of "nuclear apartheid" that India championed as it pursued its own nuclear capability. Although India has been an ardent critic of nuclear apartheid, its formal position is that Iran, unlike India, is a signatory to the NPT and thus has obligations that it must fulfill.

**Iran provides unique access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, where India seeks influence.**

## Iran Matters, More than Gas and Oil

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**T**ehran and New Delhi are concerned about the spread of Sunni Islamist militancy.

Despite episodically coming under pressure for its ties with Tehran, India sees broad relations with Iran, not just energy agreements, as supporting its growing global aspirations. India wants to be seen by others as an emerging global power having security interests apart from its intractable security competition with Pakistan.<sup>13</sup> Keeping with its extraregional interests, New Delhi has promulgated a “look east” policy to develop and sustain a multifaceted presence in the greater Middle East. India also strives to consolidate its strategic presence in Central Asia, setting up air bases in Tajikistan and expanding its footprint in Iran and Afghanistan. India eyes Central Asia as an important element of its efforts to diversify its energy needs. Moreover, it wants to expand its presence in this prized geography to deny Pakistan its much-sought strategic depth.

Iran offers India a unique asset that is fundamental to New Delhi’s power projection aspirations: geographical proximity and access to these various countries.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from India’s aspirations, bilateral ties between the two are moored by an expansive set of shared interests and objectives. First, both states are uncomfortable with a unipolar world—a euphemism for U.S. predominance—and with the role that the United States has played and will likely continue to play in the Middle East, particularly its military interventions in Iraq and possibly in Iran.<sup>15</sup> External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, during high-level meetings in Tehran in February 2007, reiterated New Delhi’s position that the nuclear impasse cannot be resolved through military means and demands “dialogue, howsoever strenuous it may be.”<sup>16</sup>

Tehran and New Delhi are also concerned about the pernicious consequences of the spread of Sunni Islamist militancy in South and Central Asia as well as elsewhere. Both fear a resurgence of Deobandi and Wahhabist political power and influence in Afghanistan and beyond. Demonstrative of this overarching shared security threat, Iran and India, along with Russia, cooperated to provide military assistance to the Northern Alliance during the Taliban period. Reflecting their mutual concern about terrorism in general and al Qaeda in Afghanistan in particular, the two states established the Indian-Iranian Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism in 2003. Related to their work on Islamist terrorism, Iran and India formed a joint working group on drug trafficking to address narcotics and arms trafficking, particularly from Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup>

India and Iran share similar concerns about Pakistan's past and present role in fostering political Islam and in providing various kinds of support to the Taliban. Currently, both are suspicious of Pakistan's sincerity in battling the Taliban and neo-Taliban presence in its territories. Throughout the Taliban period, Iran coordinated extensively with India as well as Russia to strategize means of containing the threats posed by Pakistan's various forms of involvement in Afghanistan.

### COMMERCIAL TIES

Iran and India have an explicit interest in advancing commercial and energy ties. With the world's third-largest reserve of oil and second-largest proven reserve of gas, Iran is anxious to get its hydrocarbons out of the ground and into new markets, while energy-starved India wants access to those resources.<sup>18</sup> Despite this confluence of interests, however, progress on the energy relationship has been slow, with Iranian crude oil accounting for a mere 7.5 percent of India's total crude oil imports.<sup>19</sup>

Although India would like to obtain natural gas from Iran via the much-disputed Iran-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline, that project seems doomed by commercial infeasibility and intensified U.S. opposition. The Iranian commitment to sell India liquefied natural gas (LNG) is not likely to materialize because Iran lacks the capability to produce LNG. Indian commitments to help Iran construct an LNG terminal will likely run afoul of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which mandates sanctions on any international firm that invests more than \$20 million per year in Iran's energy sector.<sup>20</sup> Currently, Congress is introducing emboldened sanctions legislation that will prevent the administration's practice of waiving sanctions on corporations that do large-scale business with Iran's energy sector as a number of countries seek to invest in this infrastructure in hopes of securing access to LNG at favorable rates.<sup>21</sup>

Commercially, the two countries are making progress on developing the North-South Transport Corridor, which permits facile transit of goods from Indian ports to Iran's port at Bandar Abbas and, in the future, Chahbahar. Goods move through Iran via rail to the Caspian Sea and onward to northern Europe and Russia.<sup>22</sup> As a part of this corridor, India is developing Chahbahar and is laying railway tracks to connect it to Zaranj in Afghanistan. It is not yet clear what facilities will be placed at Chahbahar and what their functions will be. Although India claims that this will be a commercial port, Pakistan and China suspect that once Chahbahar is complete, Indian naval vessels will be present there. Related to these initiatives, India and Iran are upgrading the 215-kilometer road that connects Zaranj and Delaran as a part of the Afghan circular road that connects Herat and Kabul via Mazar-e-Sharif in the north

and Kandahar in the south. This infrastructure is essential to India's access into Afghanistan via Iran.<sup>23</sup>

Despite political rhetoric and functional cooperation, Iran and India have formalized only three bilateral agreements of any consequence since the 1980s. Although the first of these was established in 1983,<sup>24</sup> little significant movement happened until Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee went to Tehran in 2001, when he and President Muhammad Khatami inked the Tehran Declaration. This accord focused heavily on energy and commercial concerns, reaffirmed their commitment to develop the North-South Corridor, and enshrined agreement to pursue scientific and technical cooperation. Significantly, this meeting resulted in the India-Iran Strategic Dialogue, formed to address a variety of regional and international security concerns.<sup>25</sup>

The most substantial document framing Indian-Iranian relations was the New Delhi Declaration, penned along with seven additional memoranda of understanding during Khatami's visit to New Delhi in January 2003.<sup>26</sup> Building on the 2001 accord, this declaration expanded on their shared concerns about international terrorism as well as U.S. unilateralism in Iraq and articulated a mutual interest in enhancing cooperation in various areas of science and technology.<sup>27</sup> Hydrocarbon and water issues also figured prominently in that accord, and they agreed to bilateral cooperation and infrastructure building in post-Taliban Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup>

### **DEFENSE COOPERATION**

Perhaps their most controversial commitment focused on more robust defense cooperation, and evaluating the veracity of these commitments is difficult due to the unreliability of press reports and Indian government denials. In 2001, Defense Secretary Yogendra Narain met his Iranian counterpart, Ali Shamkani, and allegedly discussed arms sales to Iran. Most importantly for India's ability to preempt aggressive moves by Pakistan, Iran also reportedly agreed to permit India access to Iranian military bases in the event of war with Pakistan.<sup>29</sup>

In the past, India helped Iran develop submarine batteries that were more effective in the warm-weather Persian Gulf waters than its Russian-manufactured batteries and is planning to sell Iran the Konkurs antitank missile.<sup>30</sup> Iran has also sought Indian help in refitting and maintaining tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and artillery guns. This collaboration has episodically disconcerted Israel, which provides spare parts and technology upgrades to India. Israel has sought assurances that Israeli technology will not find its way to Iran through Indian-Iranian cooperation.

Several analysts claim that India and Iran are hopeful that India will become a source of conventional military equipment and spare parts for Iran,

provide expertise in electronics and telecommunications, train Iran's armed forces, and assist with upgrades for many of Iran's Russian weapons systems. Iran also wants India to provide combat training for missile boat crews as well as simulators for ships and submarines and purportedly anticipates that India can provide midlife service and upgrades for fighters, warships, and subs in Indian dockyards.<sup>31</sup>

The most notorious and disputed Indian-Iranian military-to-military engagements have involved their navies. They executed their first joint naval maneuvers in the Arabian Sea in March 2003, coincident with the expanding U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea in advance of the Iraq invasion. Held against the backdrop of ever-burgeoning U.S.-Indian defense ties, most analysts concur that the timing of the exercise reflected mutual disquiet over the looming military intervention in Iraq.

They held their second naval exercise in early March 2006, overlapping with Bush's trip to Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. The exercise was held right before U.S. congressional deliberations on the U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear deal, antagonizing critics and even some supporters of the deal. Embarrassed by the activities of their newfound strategic partner, the U.S. administration first denied the visit took place and then dismissed the characterization of the visit as exaggerated, contending that it was a standard port call.<sup>32</sup> Given its timing, the conduct of the exercise signaled to Tehran and Washington alike that Washington will not dictate India's foreign policies.

In addition to nascent military ties, India has developed intelligence outposts in Iran, including the Indian consulate in Zahedan and a relatively new consulate in Bandar Abbas, which will permit India to monitor ship movements in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>33</sup> Even if the volume of hard military transfers is inconsequential at this point, the presence of Indian military advisers and intelligence officials in Iran provides India significant power-projection advantages in any future conflict with Pakistan. India's access to Iran affords New Delhi an enhanced ability to monitor Pakistan and even launch subconventional operations against Pakistan. Pakistani officials claim that India is exploiting its extensive presence in Afghanistan to enhance its intelligence activities against Pakistan and is exploiting its position in Iran to support insurgents in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. Iran, for its part, claims that Pakistan is permitting the United States to use Pakistan's Baloch territory to sponsor and encourage acts of terrorism in Iranian Baluchistan.<sup>34</sup>

India and Iran have expressed various levels of interest in other areas, such as nuclear cooperation and space launch and other space-related technologies.

**Progress on the energy relationship has been slow.**

The issue of civilian nuclear cooperation has episodically emerged but remains a controversial flashpoint.<sup>35</sup> It is well known that India cooperated with Iran on civilian nuclear programs in the past. When India tried to provide reactors to Iran that were to be placed under IAEA safeguards, the United States successfully pressured India to abandon the planned sales, fearing that Iran would use the facilities to produce weapons-grade fissile materials.<sup>36</sup> India received considerable opprobrium over the two Indian nuclear scientists who provided technical assistance to Iran's nuclear program.<sup>37</sup>

Even greater opacity surrounds Indian and Iranian claims to cooperation in space research.<sup>38</sup> Reports galvanized criticism of an Indian-U.S. deal on space cooperation, presumably out of concern that U.S. technologies could find their way into the hands of Iranian scientists seeking to expand Iran's nascent space and satellite program, which in turn could advance Iran's missile development program and improve satellite capabilities.<sup>39</sup>

### **BEYOND ENERGY**

Both states derive a number of domestic and international benefits from their emerging relationship. For India's part, ties with Iran and a number of other important Muslim-majority countries vitiate concerns at home and abroad that India has become anti-Muslim or increasingly receptive to Hindu nationalist ideology. Unease over the place of India's large Muslim minority has surfaced as a consequence of the expansion of Hindu nationalist ideology and the periodic occurrences of anti-Muslim violence, such as the anti-Muslim riots in late 1992 and early 1993 following the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque as well as the Gujarat pogroms of Muslims in 2003. India's efforts to court Muslim countries also aim to preempt Pakistani efforts to cultivate support for its position on Kashmir in important arenas comprised of Islamic states, such as the Organization of Islamic Countries.

For Iran, India offers an important path out of its deepening isolation, which has only intensified as a result of the 2005 election of the hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, its unrelenting intransigence on the nuclear issue, and most recently its capture of 15 British sailors in March 2007. Although Indian-Iranian relations were strained by India's votes at the IAEA in September 2005 and February 2006, India's various actions demonstrated New Delhi's ability to finely balance its ties with Tehran with its interest in securing its ties to the United States and the international community.

Although U.S. observers tended to characterize India's votes at the IAEA as being "against Iran," Indian officials consistently explained its actions at the IAEA to domestic and Iranian audiences alike that India went to great lengths to help Iran during the various IAEA standoffs and to ensure that

France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States did not “ride roughshod over Iranian interests.” In September 2005, India insisted that the Europeans back down from a demand to refer Iran immediately to the UN Security Council. India also secured a commitment to give the IAEA more time for negotiations than the Europeans initially granted. Having secured these commitments, the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs determined that it would be unseemly to vote against the resolution or even to abstain from voting. India’s decision was also galvanized by the realization that only Venezuela would vote against it.<sup>40</sup>

Indian interlocutors are certainly correct to note the positive impact of Indian involvement in minimizing the adverse consequences for Iran. Although Iran may not have immediately understood the Indian role in these terms, there is little doubt that Iran appreciates India’s continued commitment to Tehran even under the most trying circumstances.

India not only hosted the Iranian navy during Bush’s visit to the region and during U.S. congressional delegation visits concerning the U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear deal, but has also remained a steadfast defender of Iran and its relationship with Iran.

Despite these many forms of collaboration, several constraints will limit the extent to which India reaches out to Iran, the first being India’s relationship with the United States. Whereas the Bush administration has signaled its comfort with India’s relationship with Iran, the Democratic-led Congress has been more concerned by the relationship since taking control in January 2007.<sup>41</sup> Despite ongoing concerns about maintaining its independence in policymaking, New Delhi recognizes the indisputable benefits of a strategic relationship with the world’s only superpower. Although Indian officials opine that India does not need its partnership with the United States, few seriously believe that India can achieve all of its goals without this important alliance and the access to technology and military expertise that go with it. India will also want to maintain its important relationship with Israel, which has long surpassed Russia as India’s largest arms supplier.<sup>42</sup> Defense cooperation between India and Israel has expanded since official normalization of relations in 1992 and includes sales of large weapons systems and extensive military training.

India is also pursuing important gas and oil contracts with Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, that are opposed to an Iranian expansion of power, fear a nuclear-armed Iran, and have competed with Iran for sectarian influence in the region. Iran’s successful “victory by proxy” in Lebanon over Israel and intensifying involvement in Iraq disquiets its Arab neighbors. These states may also express

**Several constraints will limit the extent to which India reaches out to Iran.**

concern, albeit quietly, with New Delhi over its ties to Iran. These states' apprehensions may make New Delhi's balancing act more difficult to sustain, but so far India has successfully managed to maintain a middle ground.

### **Leveraging India's Influence**

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Mukherjee's high-level trip to Iran in February 2007 raised several questions about whether India will begin to tilt more freely toward Iran once the Indian-U.S. nuclear deal is sealed. Although numerous details have yet to be worked out, India's recent willingness to court Iran suggests that India will continue to pursue its interests in Iran irrespective of the international community's views generally and the U.S. views in particular about it.<sup>43</sup>

New Delhi may have concluded that U.S. interest in India is sufficiently strong and that India is adequately important to Washington's Asia strategy that India can continue in this fashion without consequence. One Indian commentator expressed this presumption well when he wrote, "Apologists for the first IAEA vote against Iran [in September 2005] say that if the Americans are insisting on an 'either-or,' it is in India's interests to choose nuclear cooperation with Washington over hydrocarbons from Iran. What they do not realize is that a country of India's strength has the political and diplomatic ability to get both."<sup>44</sup>

If India does persist in this manner, India's contribution to the Iran imbroglio may be unconstructive. Members of the UN Security Council, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the European Union seek to find ways of isolating Iran to compel it to abandon enrichment. India provides Tehran with a way out politically, diplomatically, economically, and possibly militarily. India could be more proactive in persuading its Iranian friends that it is in everyone's interests to find some way out of the current impasse and could trumpet its access to Iran to its Western friends and allies who are concerned about Iran's proliferation. India could also serve as an important interlocutor between Iran and the ever-vexed international community on an array of issues beyond the enrichment crisis. Although it will not likely occur during the tenures of Bush and Ahmadinejad, a future U.S.-Iranian rapprochement could be facilitated by India, akin to Pakistan's role in the U.S.-Chinese détente. It is not clear, however, that India fully understands this capability to be an agent for positive change within Iran. Even if it does appreciate this niche expertise, it has done precious little to market this potential.

Given India's own emergence as a nuclear power and its national motivations to acquire a nuclear capability, India may have insights into Iran's interests in acquiring such capabilities. Like Indians who supported India's nuclear program before 1998 under the belief that it was a civilian technology

that India was entitled to develop, many Iranians believe that their program is civilian in nature. Like many Indians, Iran's citizens value the technical expertise conferred by its nuclear program, believe that it will confer energy security safely, believe that their country is a great power whose status is denied by the international community, and feel that a full fuel-cycle nuclear program provides Iran immunity from being coerced by other states.<sup>45</sup>

Even though the legal status of India's arrival as a de facto nuclear-weapon state (as a nonsignatory to the NPT) differs from that of Iran (an NPT signatory), India may offer insights about the necessary elements, positive and negative, that could persuade Iran to freeze its program where it stands, even if a rollback is untenable. Yet, India's expansive suite of engagements with Iran could embolden Tehran's obduracy on its nuclear program and complicate further the policy conundrum in resolving the Iran impasse peacefully.<sup>46</sup>

Whether or not India, or the United States for that matter, understands or accepts New Delhi's putative role in influencing Iran's behavior is unclear. Washington would be remiss to let this opportunity slip away. The United States should recognize India's potential influence in Iran and encourage India to work with the international community to find a solution rather than providing Iran a meaningful path out of its otherwise constricting isolation. Iran may prove to be an important arena for India to demonstrate that it is willing to be relevant to U.S. strategic interests, a key premise of the U.S.-Indian partnership.

**India could serve as an important interlocutor between Iran and the international community.**

## Notes

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