

## As U.S. leaves Afghanistan, India reconsiders Iran policy

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Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid visited Tehran last weekend to attend the 17th meeting of the India-Iran Joint Commission. Though the most surprising outcome of the visit was the agreement on a common diplomatic initiative for resolving the Syrian crisis, a number of other agreements, including for the expansion of the strategically important Chabahar port on the Arabian Sea, signal a closer alignment on a more critical geopolitical interest that the two sides share: ensuring long-term stability in Afghanistan. Clearly the scheduled U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan is driving a new diplomatic engagement between India and Iran.

Contrast this week's outcome to the March visit to New Delhi by the speaker of Iran's parliament, Ali Larijani, who declared at the time that the two countries had developed some "major differences."

If a chill had settled on India-Iran relations, it was largely due to adjustments New Delhi had made to its approach to the Iranian nuclear program. At the behest of the U.S., India voted at the International Atomic Energy Agency to refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council. It reduced its oil imports from Tehran considerably, even though Iran had been one of India's principal sources of crude for decades. It also extricated itself from the long-discussed Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, which many in Delhi saw as the solution to India's energy insecurity, instead resting its hopes in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline project, the completion of which still seems a distant dream.

As Khurshid put it in an interview with Britain's Sky TV in December, India had sacrificed a lot to cooperate with the international community regarding Iran, and deserved a "pat on the back."

But a number of factors are now pushing India to reconsider whether it can continue making such sacrifices in its Iran policy. And if the Iranian nuclear issue was the source of divergence between the two nations, their constellation of interests in the context of managing the post-2014 situation in Afghanistan seems to be forcing them to cooperate again. Both India and Iran want to avoid the return of Taliban-style extremist leadership in Afghanistan—Iran because the Taliban is hostile to Iran's Shiite political ideology, and India because a Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan that could destabilize Kashmir.

Yet though India and Iran share a common vision for Afghanistan, India has a lot more riding on a stable outcome there than Iran does. First, New Delhi has invested approximately \$2 billion in Afghanistan. As the drawdown of international forces approaches, India fears that its presence will be the primary target of the Taliban's return. Indeed, the signals from Afghanistan are extremely disconcerting, with the peace process stalled and the Afghan National Army seemingly incapable of maintaining peace without external assistance.

Second, historically speaking, India's borders have always been New Delhi's primary international concern. It is no coincidence that India expanded its outreach and engagement toward East and Southeast Asia in the past decade, which also saw the U.S. and its allies trying to pacify Afghanistan. But as the probability of Afghanistan again becoming an extremist safe haven increases, so does India's paranoia about its borders, and it will as a result engage less with other regions, which will have a negative impact on India's international relations.

Both these concerns are exacerbated by the fact that India is the only major stakeholder in the region with no direct land-transit links to Kabul—Iran, Pakistan and China all share borders with Afghanistan. Pakistan has denied India any transit through its territory and remains extremely wary of India's presence in Afghanistan, which Islamabad views as a direct threat to Pakistan. Meanwhile, the India-China border dispute, Beijing's strategic alliance with Islamabad and the rugged Himalayan terrain separating India from China all combine to make a transit route through China a nonstarter.

Iran, then, is India's only viable option for direct access, and this strategic dynamic is pushing New Delhi to develop a new relationship with Tehran.

This helps explain this weekend's deals, which included a \$100 million project to expand the capacity of Iran's Chabahar port. India has also expressed interest in developing a rail link from Chabahar to Hagijak in Afghanistan's Bamiyan province. This 560-mile rail link would help India transport iron ore from one of the largest mines in Afghanistan, to which the Steel Authority of India Ltd. now has the mining rights. Clearly these moves are motivated by India's desire to remain involved in Afghanistan after 2014.

The problem for India, however, continues to be Iran's troubled relationship with the West, especially the U.S. India's desire to nurture the strategic relationship with the U.S. developed over the past decade was the principal reason India-Iran relations suffered in the first place. However, there is a growing sense within the Indian establishment that the U.S. is helpless to resolve the Afghan quagmire. Moreover, Pakistan is now openly defying the U.S. on the Iran issue, for example by commencing construction on the gas pipeline between Iran and Pakistan. The pipeline's potential extension to China is a nightmare scenario for policymakers in New Delhi.

India's domestic debate complicates its position further. The problem is one of perceptions: When Pakistan, an American client state for most of its national existence, can defy U.S. diktats, why is India, which prides itself on the tradition of strategic autonomy in foreign policy, caving to U.S. demands?

As a result, India's balance of interests is slowly shifting toward thawing its ties with Iran, even as it tries to maintain its partnership with the U.S. Doing so will be difficult. However, decision-makers in New Delhi are hoping that their counterparts in Washington actually understand this dynamic. If they still don't, they should.

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