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Focus > Global Diplomacy

India and Iran in the Obama Era

By **Sreeram Chaulia**

India and Iran are two of the world's oldest powers. However, ties between the two countries are strained. This is primarily due to their very different relationships with the United States, tensions over Iran's nuclear ambitions and disagreements over a gas pipeline between the two countries. Despite these frustrations, Sreeram Chaulia argues that the Obama era offers new horizons in India-Iran relations — especially when it comes to intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism efforts.

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While improved relations with India was one of the few U.S. foreign policy success stories during George W. Bush's two terms in office, Iran became a bête noire that sneered at Western goals of reining in its nuclear program.

The shadow of these divergent U.S. preferences plagued India-Iran relations for almost the entire duration of the Bush Administration.

India and Iran's proximity to Pakistan has opened opportunities for strategic cooperation between New Delhi and Tehran.

But once the Obama Administration took office in Washington, war clouds drifted away from the Iran theater and helped ease the mix of outside irritants intruding upon India-Iran relations.

While the United States and Iran continue to be embroiled in an intermittent cat-and-mouse game of negotiation and provocation, the acoustics are relatively free of war drums and

are expected to remain so due to the Obama Administration's penchant for a diplomatic isolation-cum-engagement strategy towards Tehran.

Indeed, in the Obama era, geopolitics is conspiring to bring Iran and India closer together. The countries' proximity to Pakistan has opened opportunities for strategic cooperation between New Delhi and Tehran. Pakistan's fathering — and subsequent nurturing — of the Sunni fundamentalist Taliban in Afghanistan places India and Iran in the same boat.

In post-Soviet Afghanistan, New Delhi and Tehran supported an anti-Taliban alliance that was anathema to Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). To this day, Iran and India find themselves on the same side in opposing the Taliban insurgency that still receives considerable tactical and material support from the ISI.

Iran and India cooperated against the Taliban through construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway, which improves transportation links between Afghanistan's main cities and the Iranian deep sea port of Chabahar.

The Taliban and the ISI were so alarmed at the prospect of an India-Iran axis to minimize Pakistani influence in Afghanistan that they launched a series of attacks along the highway's sites, killing six Indians and 129 Afghans. Tehran and New Delhi did not waver, and the highway was finally inaugurated in January 2009.

As the Taliban, al Qaeda and their sympathizers in Pakistan mount a ferocious assault on Afghanistan, India and Iran will watch the development with increasing anxiety. Should the Taliban rout the Hamid Karzai-led dysfunctional Afghan state, it would entail a major strategic gain for Pakistan and lead to the export of cross-border Sunni fundamentalist terror into both Iran and India.

A major irritant in India-Iran relations in recent years has been the drastic enhancement of defense ties between New Delhi and Tel Aviv.

Should the Obama Administration cut loose and decamp one day from "Af-Pak," Iran and India would be left to deal with the blowback in the form of serious national security threats from triumphant Sunni jihadi forces.

Given these ground realities, New Delhi and Tehran will do well to collaborate with Moscow (which has its own Islamist demons in the Caucasus) — and map out a regional plan to prevent the takeover of Afghanistan by Pakistani proxies.

Islamabad's attempts to steer the internal Afghan political reconciliation talks into an arrangement in Kabul favorable to Pakistani designs should alarm India, Iran and Russia to act in concert.

The United States, which has been frequently vexed at the unreliability of Pakistan as a partner against the

Taliban and Al Qaeda, should welcome such a regional initiative that would add spine to the limping Afghan state and prevent its re-Talibanization.

In this context, there are hints that New Delhi and Tehran are already cooperating against Pakistan-sponsored Sunni fundamentalism in the Sistan-o-Balochistan province of eastern Iran.

Remaining tensions

Despite India and Iran's mutual interest in beating back the ISI-supported Taliban insurgency and Sunni extremism, several issues prevent the two countries from becoming true allies. First and foremost is India's opposition to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

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One key moment of tension between New Delhi and Tehran was the aftermath of the former's two votes against the latter at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2005 and 2006.

Ali Larijani, the then Iranian Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, expressed disappointment that he "did not expect India to do so" and used the past tense

while describing friendship with New Delhi.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who has publicly stated India's opposition to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, even phoned President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the IAEA deliberations of 2005, advising that "Tehran should be flexible and make concessions" to Washington's demands that Iran immediately halt enrichment of fissionable material.

Such overt messages and confessions by senior Indian officials after the events confirmed Iran's allegations that India was acting under intense U.S. pressure against a fellow developing country. Iranian diplomats went on a counter-attack by arguing that the India-U.S. civilian nuclear deal — the apparent bait for whose sake Manmohan Singh sacrificed Iran — "cannot be justified."

But with the Obama Administration stepping on the gas pedal by mobilizing international opinion for sanctions on Iran after a fruitless year of amiability, New Delhi will clearly not alter its position that a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable.

Another major irritant in India-Iran relations in recent years has been the drastic enhancement of defense ties between New Delhi and Tel Aviv.

New Delhi has to be nuanced in approaching

Iran has accused India of abetting the spy satellite technology of the "Zionist enemy" which it believes would be deployed to undermine Iran's nuclear and military facilities.

Tehran, because even Russia is on board with the Obama Administration's new campaign to compel Iran to accept a nuclear fuel swap agreement.

India, as per Tehran's reading, was acting as a collaborator of its mortal foe and cryptically joining the pack of wolves baying for a frontal attack on Iran. A rapprochement after the setbacks during the Bush Administration is in order for both New Delhi and Tehran, but India will remain wary of Iran's tendency to yoke and hyphenate the bilateral relationship to the latter's extraneous tussle with Israel.

A further source of tension between New Delhi and Tehran is the proposed \$7.5 billion Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline, which was first mooted as a groundbreaking project to meet the rising energy needs of the sub-continental economies in 1994.

The trilateral "peace pipeline" dream has not come to fruition to this day due to pricing, transit fee and security disagreements.

India seeks guarantees of uninterrupted gas supply to avoid dependency on an energy source which passes via a violence-ridden province of Pakistan, a state with which it has had congenitally distrustful relations.

Islamabad has not yet proffered such assurances and has instead gone ahead to sign a deal with Tehran in May 2009 for the first leg of the pipeline just between the two countries, excluding India.

The road forward

Since 2003, Iran has risen as a preeminent power in the Middle East and of the "Shiite crescent" (a phrase coined by Jordan's King Abdullah II). Ultimately, India will have to factor in the spectacular ascent of Iran as a key state in its broader neighborhood and find specific agendas for strategic gain.

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With the ghost of the George W. Bush era slowly fading, global constellations are better aligned for new horizons in India-Iran relations, especially on intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism.

New Delhi has to be nuanced in approaching Tehran, because even Russia is on board the Obama Administration's new

campaign to compel Iran to accept a nuclear fuel swap

agreement. India does not wish to be a sore thumb like China, ignoring the mass of international opinion that Iran has been given a reasonable offer which should be taken.

Already in June 2009, India's premier multinational corporation, Reliance Industries, pulled out of a contract for refining Iranian crude oil to avoid being on the wrong side of accumulating sanctions on Tehran.

The best case scenario for India and Iran for the foreseeable future is to open non-economic, i.e. geopolitical, channels where the two share common concerns, and to quietly initiate joint actions that yield security benefits.

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