

Iran Moves To Reintegrate With South Asia Neighbors

by Ramtanu Maitra

In a three-day (April 27-29) tour of three South Asian countries (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India), Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad put Iran firmly back in its eastern neighborhood as a country that is ready to contribute to regional stability, and one which cannot be kept isolated by external designs.

The new “Go East” diplomatic initiative, and the prospect that a more-than-decade-long British-American veto of the gas pipeline through Iran, Pakistan, and India is being overridden, speaks to the strategic context for this potentially dramatic shift. Leading nations of Asia, including China, India, Russia, and even Iran, are seeing clear evidence that London is pushing a permanent war-permanent chaos scheme against Asia. And while they see that the center of the global destabilization is London, they also worry that, in the final months of the Bush-Cheney administration in Washington, the United States could be drawn into the British game—particularly targeting Iran, Vice President Dick Cheney’s current leading hate-object. Thus, the move to deepen diplomatic collaboration among the leading states of Asia, is driven by a common war-avoidance objective, and is, in the words of Lyndon LaRouche, taking on the character of a “strategic asymmetric response” to the London drive for genocidal war and chaos.

Tehran’s Quiet Diplomacy

Ahmadinejad’s successful trip was preceded by months of quiet diplomacy, characteristic of Tehran. In February 2007, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee travelled to Tehran, and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Safari was in Delhi in September.

To begin with, Iran is no stranger to the Indian Subcontinent. As two of the oldest civilizations in the world, India and

Iran have had ties for centuries. Historians have documented the Indo-Aryans who crossed over Iran on their way to India. The name “Hind” came from the name given to the land of the River Indus by the ancient Persians. The Indian Subcontinent still harbors the minority of Zoroastrians or Parsis (as they are called), whose ancestors fled Persia and sought refuge in the subcontinent following the advent of Islam in Persia. This migration turned out to be a great success story because of the close relations that existed between the Persian and Indian civilizations.

Throughout the Cold War years, although Iran, under Shah Reza Pahlavi, acted as a frontline state against the Soviet Union, and India was one of the leading proponents of non-alignment, the relationship between India and Iran, and Iran and Pakistan, remained warm and mutually beneficial.

However, Iran’s image was distorted significantly in the post-Cold War period. After the Soviets were pushed out of Afghanistan, Pakistan took control of re-fashioning Afghanistan by bringing the orthodox Sunni regime of the Taliban into Kabul. This made Tehran particularly suspicious of the Sunni-majority Pakistan. Then, again, in the post-9/11 days, London and Washington’s alliance with Islamabad, in their efforts to occupy Afghanistan and tame the Taliban, and their identification of Iran as one of the three nations in President Bush’s “axis of evil,” worried Tehran no end. It was evident that London and Washington were hellbent on isolating Tehran.

That London-Washington policy came to influence New Delhi as well. The Manmohan Singh government, having joined the Anglo-American-led “war on terror” against the Islamic jihadists, voted in support of the West-sponsored resolution at the United Nations to impose further sanctions

against Iran. Iran was accused of surreptitiously developing nuclear weapons, posing a threat to mankind's future. The Singh government, seeking closer relations to the United States in the strategic and nuclear power-generation areas, sneakily deserted Tehran, and joined those who shouted from the rooftops that Iran was the greatest threat to the world.

But, it is said often that a dose of reality works wonders. And, that pretty much happened here as well. Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, who played a crucial role in helping the U.S. and NATO troops to wage the war on terror, and was never trusted by the Iranians, is no longer at the helm in Pakistan. His aggressive policies on behalf of the foreign invaders, rejected by Pakistanis, have ushered in a coalition government which favors dialogue with neighboring nations instead of seeking a dangerous military solution. In New Delhi, a realization has dawned that the Bush administration, now viewed as even worse than the proverbial "lame duck" government, has led India to a non-viable path. The rise of the crude oil price to over US\$115 a barrel, and still climbing, has forced New Delhi to shuffle back to seek Iran's help.

There is little doubt that these developments, and the sharp weakening of the U.S. economy and credibility worldwide, were instrumental in making those three days an unmitigated success for Iran, and for President Ahmadinejad.

Energy Diplomacy

Ahmadinejad's visits to Pakistan and India were centered on the much-delayed, and written-off from time to time, construction of the gas pipeline from Iran's South Pars gas field, located in western Iran, to India via Pakistan's Balochistan province. According to an April 29 editorial in Pakistan's Lahore-based *Daily Times*, Tehran had gone through a number of contradictory phases in its approach to the project, as had Pakistan and India. But Iran has now understood the importance of elevating economic interests above ideological revolution.

"Pakistan has also revised its misplaced military-oriented view of its 'geopolitical importance' and India has reinterpreted its security doctrines facing westwards to Pakistan and beyond. With oil prices touching \$120 per barrel and food becoming scarce globally, South Asia has been jolted into taking another look at its view of itself as a bread basket," the *Daily Times* pointed out.

In fact, New Delhi has been in talks for almost a decade with Iran, which has the world's second-largest known gas reserves, after Russia, on a 2,600 kilometer (1,615 mile) pipeline via Pakistan. Talks on the estimated \$7.6 billion pipeline began in 1994, but have been delayed for a number of reasons, including well-known tensions between India and Pakistan.

Separately, India signed a deal with Tehran in 2005, to supply of 5 million metric tons of gas each year for 25 years. Energy-short India, which imports more than 70% of its energy needs, is racing to secure new supplies of oil and gas to improve the lives of more than a billion Indians.

But beyond the pipeline, closer relations with Iran are important for at least two reasons: Iran is the second-largest supplier of oil to India, after Saudi Arabia, and a potential source of natural gas; and it borders Afghanistan. Iran remains highly influential in the southwestern part of Afghanistan. This also bodes well for India, which considers Iranian influence there to be crucial for maintaining regional stability. In addition, of course, India has a small, but influential, Shi'a community which looks to Iran as its voice in the Islamic world.

A Regional Outlook

A few days before Ahmadinejad embarked on his three-nation trip, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between the Indian Railway Board and the Iranian Railway Company, providing for Iran to build a 600-km rail link to Russia. The MoU envisages the construction of a new track, which will connect Iran's strategic port of Chabahar with the city of Fahrej in central Iran. It will complement the proposed road link between Chabahar and Afghanistan. This corridor can become a gateway for trade with Central Asia, by hooking up with Afghanistan's proposed garland road system, which envisages the construction of a web of interlocking roads throughout Afghanistan.

According to the daily *Tehran Times*, analysts say that a rail link between Iran and Russia should be seen as an extension of the North-South transport corridor, which begins with Indian ports such as Mumbai. Ships then head towards Bandar Abbas in Iran on the Persian Gulf. From there, cargo is moved to the Iranian ports of Bandar Anzali and Amirabad on the Caspian Sea.

The final leg of the route goes from Astrakhan on the Russian side of the Caspian, and reaches Moscow and St. Petersburg across the Volga corridor.

Reports from New Delhi indicate that the visit of Ahmadinejad was not planned. The Indian government had received a request from the Iranian President's plane for permission to refuel in India on its flight from Sri Lanka to Tehran. The technical stopover was tactically converted into an official visit by India. This was a shrewd move for correcting the seemingly negative perceptions of New Delhi towards Iran.

But this did not prevent Washington from throwing barbs at New Delhi. As the proposed "stopover" of the Iranian President was announced, U.S. State Department spokesman Tom Casey asked India to use its influence with Iran to persuade the latter to suspend its uranium enrichment activities. New Delhi, offended by the unsolicited advice, immediately issued a brief statement saying: "India and Iran are ancient civilizations whose relations span centuries. Both nations are perfectly capable of managing all aspects of their relationship with the appropriate degree of care and attention."

Before this little tiff became public, the Indian external affairs minister and one of the principal architects behind the shifting of India's Iran policy, Pranab Mukherjee, issued a statement directed at Washington, saying: "We are advising

Iran that since it is a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, it has some obligation to international treaties. We are telling the U.S., ‘do not take on yourself the responsibility whether Iran was manufacturing weapons or not. Leave it to the IAEA, the designated authority.’”

In addition, on April 20, speaking at the first International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)-Citi India Global forum in Washington, India’s National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan pointed out: “Whatever happens to Iran or what others do to Iran has tremendous impact here [in India]. We have the second-largest Shi’a population. So, it’s not only a foreign policy issue, but a domestic issue.”

Referring to a “great deal taking place between India and Iran which is not in the public realm,” Narayanan said that India has avoided “conflict diplomacy” with Iran, and has no intent to be part of any “compact,” referring to the negotiations of the group of six nations with Iran over the nuclear issue.

But, at the same time, he pointed out: “India is better poised, better placed than anyone else [to talk to Iran]. We do not want to be part of a compact. We believe that we understand Iran better.”

Sri Lankan Gambit

In Sri Lanka, the Iranian President had a two-day (April 28-29) stay in response to an invitation from President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had visited Iran in November 2007. Ahmadinejad inaugurated the construction of the Iran-funded (US\$450 million) Uma Oya hydroelectric project at Wellawaya in the Monaragala district. When completed, the project is expected to produce 100 megawatts of electricity. The visit is also expected to result in the finalization of an agreement for Iranian financial and technical assistance, for enabling the Sapugaskanda oil refinery to handle Iran’s light crude. This project is expected to result in a further Iranian investment of US\$1 billion.

In addition, according to a high-level Indian intelligence analyst, Iran has also agreed to provide low-interest credit to Sri Lanka, to enable it to purchase military equipment from Pakistan and China, and to train a small group of Sri Lankan army and intelligence officers in Iran. A team of about ten officers has already proceeded to Iran for training, after a clandestine visit to Sri Lanka by Brig. Gen. Qassem Suleimani, the director general of Iran’s Quds Force, or the Jerusalem Brigade, which is, *inter alia*, responsible for covert actions against Israel and for liaison with friendly foreign intelligence agencies.

Both Colombo and Tehran are making a distinct shift in their overall security policies. Sri Lanka has been devastated over the last 24 years by a civil war which has pitted the Tamil minority against the majority Buddhists. Colombo has failed to resolve this crisis, and had turned to Norway—an adjunct to Britain in any policy deliberations vis-à-vis Asia—for a solution.

Over a period of time, Colombo has realized that, while the mediators express concern over the terrorist activities of the Tamil Tigers, these terrorists continue to flourish financially in Britain and its former colonies, such as Australia, South Africa, Canada, and its near-colony Norway. The *modus operandi* employed by the mediators to undermine Colombo’s authority is to accuse it of human rights violations.

In recent months, Colombo has brought in China, providing it with a naval facility in the southern port of Hambantota; and, it has begun to rely on Iran for financing the purchase of arms from Pakistan, and training some of its army and intelligence officers. Colombo also has extensive ties with Indian military and intelligence circles. This shift is being viewed by security analysts as an attempt by Colombo to rectify its security policies in light of the new realities in the region.

As Colombo shifts its policies by recognizing the emergence of China, India, and Iran as powers in the region, and the existential threat of depending on its old colonial ruler, Britain, Iran is also in the process of adopting a “Look East” policy, some Pakistani analysts report.

Although Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, who attended university in the southern Indian city of Bangalore, is credited with driving this “Look East” strategy, Lahore’s *Daily Times* pointed out that Iran’s policy towards India and China has matured. In a recent editorial, the paper said: “It [Iran] sought this ‘*ostpolitik*’ to balance the rivalries it was facing on its Western coast and at the global level. It looked at Pakistan as an extension of the danger it felt from across the Gulf and grew close to India to create a regional balance in its favor. But because of its India-centric worldview, Pakistan was compelled to look at this with suspicion. Now that security concern is changing with the rapidly forming political consensus in Pakistan’s civil society about normalization of relations with India. Indeed, Pakistan’s geopolitical view of itself as an ‘obstruction’ is changing fast and it has been seeking India’s cooperation on the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline without linking it to the ‘Kashmir issue’ as it did when the project was first mooted.

“With India and China investing heavily in Iran’s natural resources and infrastructure—and China investing in the natural resources and coastal development in Pakistan—Iran’s “Go East” strategy could finally bear fruit. Hopefully Pakistan will, in time, break free of its security obsession with India to accept Indian investments, and thus complete a regional economic map that is more real than the RCD [Regional Cooperation for Development] that Pakistan originally organized unsuccessfully in the 1960s with Iran and Turkey in an effort to break free from its South Asian geography,” the editorial said.

In fact, there are reports that Iran has expressed its intention to join the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). If, and when, that happens, Iran will easily become one of its most important member-states, given its potential to increase the so-far abysmal intra-regional trade.