

THE FRIEND OF OUR ENEMY IS OUR FRIEND?

India wants to be closer to Iran. Why America shouldn't be worried.

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Alexander the Great's Empire. Rome. The Incas. The Mayans. The Mongols. The Ottoman Empire. The British Empire. The Third Reich. Imperial Japan.

History shows us that the balance of power constantly shifts. Some empires rise and fall in dramatically quick fashion, like the Third Reich and the Japanese Empire, and, comparatively speaking, the Mongols' and Alexander's Empires. Others, like the Roman and Ottoman Empires, span many centuries. A safe bet is that there will be no permanent balance of power.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair said today on the premiere of Fareed Zakaria's new *GPS* show on CNN that "In the world that's developing, where the central power is shifting east and it's shifting east fast, and I think we in the West, in America and the U.K., Europe, we're not quite getting this. You know, we kind of get it in theory, we don't get it at an emotional level in reality."

The talk of the last few years, in terms of candidates that can one day eclipse the U.S. as the dominant global force, has been of China and India. While talk of eclipsing the U.S. may be premature as both countries, despite their impressive rise in recent years, have a host of major problems, the shift of power there, at the expense of the U.S. and the West, is undeniable. And while the greater focus has been on China, the safe bet would be with India, with its more stable and far more democratic system of government. While China's growth has been stronger and its ceiling for success may be higher, its floor for failure is also far lower and more risky because of the larger problems it faces, such as rising discontent among Chinese and major environmental concerns. India, while not yielding as high a payoff potential, then, poses far less of a risk of a massive reversal in its recent successes.

So while after the recent earthquake and with an eye cast to the coming Olympics the Chinese government is becoming increasingly nervous of both satisfying its own people

and the international community, India seems to be a little more comfortable in its shoes as a rising power(*i.e.* if China is so secure why such a large military buildup?). Still, while India has enjoyed warm and cordial relations in recent years with the U.S., it is easy to forget that Pakistan was America's ally in the Cold War while the Soviet Union was the patron of India, and even more recently that the Clinton administration imposed economic sanctions on India after its 1998 nuclear tests. And yet, the strong economic links with India today are undeniable, and despite the Bush Administration's particularly close relationship(at least, until recently)with the Musharraf regime, Pakistan can only dream of the economic ties enjoyed between India and America.

America needs India, and India needs America. [As the Times of India wrote in a May 2nd editorial, "we should keep in mind, our relationship with America is by far our most important one in the world and it's going forward."](#)

On the surface, then, it would be surprising that India is trying to cultivate and expand its relationship with Iran at a time when the U.S. is doing everything it can to isolate Iran, putting heavy pressure on all its allies to avoid engaging in high-level, official talks and visits. But upon closer inspection, it should not be so surprising and perhaps India could teach America a few things about how to interact with Iran.

India and Iran have had an important historical relationship going back centuries. [Persian culture was particularly influential during the Mughal period](#) before the British came to dominate the Indian Subcontinent. Today, America needs to also recognize that it is virtually alone in its ideas about non-engagement with controversial and/or rogue nations(or at least nations it labels as such). Russia behaves in a similar fashion at times, as does Israel. [But even Israel just recently has been engaged in talks with Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah.](#) When India made plans to host a visit of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the U.S. strongly objected. But in its response to the American pressure to not host Ahmadinejad, India's foreign ministry released a statement which highlighted this difference in values with the Bush Administration, subtly asserting its prerogative to pursue its own course with Iran:

["Our attention has been drawn to a comment made by the official spokesman of the US State Department concerning the visit of President Ahmadinejad of Iran to India. 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. The situation in the region has always drawn the attention of both the nations and it can be seen perfectly well that these have been managed through continuous dialogue and exchange of delegations at various levels. Neither country needs any guidance on the future conduct of bilateral relations as both countries believe that engagement and dialogue alone lead to peace. It is important that the genius of each nation living in a particular region is respected and allowed to flower to meet the expectations of enriching relations with neighbours."](#)

In a press conference after the meeting, when questions came up regarding Washington's wishes for India's talks with Iran, [the Foreign Secretary subtly rebuffed such inquiries](#), an indication that it was further trying to distance itself from Iranian-American tensions.

India, itself a nuclear weapons power, has no wish to see the nuclear weapons club grow, the same way that most other nuclear powers do not wish to see that technology spread. Obviously, it diminishes the significance of being a nuclear power when more nations are added to your number, and it also makes existing nuclear powers insecure, especially when they are newer ones. These newer powers are more likely to expand their nuclear arsenal, not disarm it, if others join the club. Furthermore, in the case of Iran, it has been widely reported that a nuclear armed-Iran would trigger a regional nuclear arms race in the Middle-East, something only doomsday cults would wish to see. As the *Times of India* wrote in the same editorial quoted above, “It is, however, not in India's interest for Iran to become a nuclear weapons power. [New Delhi](#) must — as we have argued in these columns earlier — leave it to the International Atomic Energy Agency to deal with Iran's nuclear designs.” Yet even in that statement, there is a veiled warning to Washington that India is putting its faith in the IAEA, and not in any kind of military action against Iran. As quoted above, India’s official line is that engagement and dialogue is the way to deal with such issues. And India has made it clear that, along with the United States, it opposes any attempt by Iran to acquire a nuclear weapons program. However, India is for Iran having a civilian nuclear program.

For an American administration that has said in the past, in the words of President Bush, that it does not “do nuance,” this position of India has to be vexing. After all, with President Bush as the lead advocate, Congress approved an extraordinary nuclear cooperation pact that could prove to be invaluable to India’s nuclear industry, despite the risks this entailed with America’s relationship with Pakistan at a crucial juncture in the “War on Terror” and a number of other concerns that will not easily go away. The Indian National Congress Party, the lead party in the ruling parliamentary coalition, is for this deal. The problem is, they are beholden to India’s communist parties as these parties are (at least for now) significant parts of the coalition, and, as is natural with communist parties, they detest the capitalist United States. So their continued opposition has all but killed the deal. As *The Economist* puts it, “[For America, India is an annoying ally.](#)”

There, is, however, another deal that the communists prefer: a gas pipeline linking natural gas resources in Iran to India that would go through Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is some talk of bringing China into this deal as well. Many in India favor the broad strokes of this deal, even if major details are yet to be resolved, *e.g.*, the price of the gas and the fact that the pipeline would go through particularly unstable parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan where the Taliban and al-Qaeda are resurgent([in fact, the Pakistani Taliban leader felt comfortable enough in Pakistan, that, rather than stay in hiding, he just recently held a public news conference there](#)).

Obviously, Washington is not in favor of this deal. But if it rethinks its strategy, it can make an awful lot of sense. [Washington and NATO accuse Iran of supporting insurgent groups in Afghanistan](#); I discussed in my previous articles that Pakistan has been supporting extremist groups in Indian Kashmir, and [India is supporting extremist groups in the same parts of Pakistan through which the pipeline would be laid](#). While the area, then, appears to be one huge free-for-all, the solution should be obvious: since Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Iran all stand to gain significantly from this pipeline

deal, should it go through, it makes perfect sense that all four would be willing to set aside their differences (at least concerning this one issue) and work together on the security of this region in particular.

This means bad news for the Taliban and al-Qaeda. That is good news for America's interests in the region, both in promoting stability in Afghanistan *and* Pakistan, with its nuclear weapons everyone wants to keep safe from Taliban and al-Qaeda elements. Anything that weakens the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the area makes this less likely to occur. Furthermore, Iran, India, and Pakistan start to meddle less in destabilization games, and that will reduce overall tensions in the area and lead to greater cooperation overall in the region. People today say "Look at Germany and France; they are so economically tied together that they would never go to war with each other again." The seeds for such a future are already planted between India and Pakistan; this pipeline would only encourage this trend even further. The other countries involved would be brought together with a similar economic thread, and such cooperation would decrease the likelihood that one party would support violent instigation against their would-be-nemeses (e.g., Kashmir) for fear that the violence would spread to the area of their precious pipeline. Sounds too good to be true? It is not: this is the stuff of which peace is made. And if China is brought into this deal, as some talk suggests it may, it can bring its considerable regional, even global, influence to bear on making this pipe dream a reality.

Of course, this is not to suggest that overcoming these obstacles will be easy. It will not. But it is in the interests of all parties concerned to attempt to overcome them. Still, the 800-pound gorilla in the room is an ever larger issue than anything to do with a pipeline: it is the standoff between Iran and the United States over Iran's nuclear program. Perhaps, should there be talks with a U.S. administration and Iran, one of several carrots that could be dangled before Tehran in order to induce it to give up its (probable) nuclear weapons ambitions would be U.S. approval of, perhaps even support of and involvement with, the proposed pipeline. It is certainly at least worthy of consideration as a realistic option. And there have been signs that Iran's people and leadership have tired of Ahmadinejad's blustering foreign policy, most recently the election by an overwhelming majority of one of his major rivals to the position of Speaker of the Iranian Parliament. This man, Ali Larijani, "[who resigned as the country's nuclear negotiator in October over differences with Mr. Ahmadinejad, is a conservative and an ardent advocate of Iran's nuclear program, but is seen as more pragmatic in his approach and perhaps willing to engage in diplomacy with the West](#)," notes *The New York Times*. So a breakthrough is more likely than would initially appear.

For Washington to expect India to rebuff Iran is simply not realistic. More Shiite Muslims live in India than in any country outside of Iran, bilateral trade between the two countries increased 55% just last year, and India's Indian Railways has just agreed to construct a 600 km railroad linking a free-trade-zone in southeastern Iran to the Iranian interior. America is still a superpower, but not the superpower it used to be. It depends on India enough economically, and India has enough clout, to be able to pursue this separate path with Iran. Furthermore, the *Times of India* notes that "[In a surprising twist,](#)

Pakistan has now begun to say it does not need any US intervention in its ties with India and the two countries are capable of addressing issues bilaterally — the same stand that India has taken vis-a-vis Iran. All this points to the gradual loss of American leverage and prestige in the region.”

As I noted when I opened this article, we are in the midst of a balance-of-power shift that is not entirely in America’s favor. Yet, should America be able to solve the impasse of the nuclear issue with Iran and use our support for and/or involvement with this pipeline as one of the linchpins of such an accord, it stands to improve American standing and influence in the region rather than see it diminished. It would see a more secure Pakistan and Afghanistan as well, and its relationship with India, the world’s largest democracy, would be all the warmer, and closer, as well.

So while America’s feathers got ruffled by the visit of a few hours on April 29th of the less-than-diplomatic Iranian President, he does not have final say in all matters or even most matters of state in Iran. America should see this as an opportunity, then, rather than a reason to be angry with India.