

# India and Iran Are Strengthening Their 'Civilizational' Ties

by Ramtanu Maitra

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's April 10-13 trip to Iran has been described in Tehran as the "virtual manifestation of a timely strategic handshake between two ancient civilizations."

Referring to various commonalities between India and Iran, and stressing that the time has come to reinvigorate bilateral relations in areas including energy, education, culture, science and technology, economy and commerce, agriculture and industry, the Indian Prime Minister addressed the Islamic Consultative Assembly, also known as the Majlis, in Tehran. "I come to your country to renew the strong civilizational links between India and Iran," said Vajpayee. "In our two countries, language and literature, art and architecture, philosophical and cultural traits, all bear the enduring stamp of this continuing dialogue and interaction."

The Indian Prime Minister and Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami discussed in depth the troubles and turmoils that have brought the region to the brink of potential disaster. Expressing great concern about terrorism and instability in Afghanistan, and agreeing to develop regional cooperation in the continent, especially among the Indian Ocean Rim countries, both sides called for fostering bilateral, multi-lateral, regional, and international cooperation to establish peace in Asia.

On April 10, the first day of Vajpayee's visit, the two sides signed seven agreements, including the Tehran Declaration on energy, water, trade, and science.

## 'Strategic Ties'

The key issues under focus during the trip were what were described by the Iranian diplomats as "strategic ties." These included:

- Establishing a North-South trade corridor which would link India and Iran to Russia and the Caucasus. Indian goods are already arriving from India's west coast by sea to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas for consumption within Iran. In the near future, the goods will be transported by rail to the Iranian Caspian Sea ports and onward.

India-Iran trade is now close to \$1.2 billion annually, with Iran being the major beneficiary of the trade so far. New Delhi, however, expects the North-South corridor will not only enhance India-Iran trade significantly in the coming years, but it

would open up new dimensions to India's trade and economic linkage to Central Asia and Russia.

- Setting up a multibillion-dollar pipeline to transport natural gas from Iran to India. After Russia, Iran has the second-largest gas reserves in the world, estimated at 23 trillion cubic meters. One of the important features of the Iranian gas is that about two-thirds of it is non-associated gas (recoverable without joint production with oil). About half of the gas reserves have been discovered as a result of extensive exploration after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

A Joint Committee has been set up by India and Iran to evaluate and publish a definite set of proposals. India's leading private petroleum company, the Reliance Group, has set up a major refinery at Jamnagar on the India-Pakistan border in anticipation of the pipeline coming through Pakistan overland. Security through Pakistani territory, where extremist and terrorist groups operate, is the major issue.

Former U.S. President William J. Clinton, who was recently in India, has met with the owner of the Reliance Group and has reportedly expressed keen interest in the pipeline project. During his trip to Iran, Vajpayee made it clear that it is his intent to forge an energy tie-up with Iran. "Iran is willing to sell its gas, and we are willing to buy," he said.

- Building Indo-Iranian cooperation to contain the spread of the Afghani Taliban's influence in the region. Iran, inhabited by the Shia Muslims, had always felt threatened by the orthodox brand of Sunni fundamentalism preached by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

## The Taliban: A Problem in Common

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in recent years has drawn India and Iran closer in their assessment of the new threats to regional security. If Iran is worried by Kabul's role in drug trafficking and its harsh treatment of the Shia minority, India has made no secret of its antipathy toward the Pakistan-Afghanistan nexus in the so-called Kashmir *jihad*. Neither India nor Iran recognized the administration of the Taliban militia, which swept through Afghanistan in 1996 and ousted the government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani. Both countries are now backing the anti-Taliban forces represented by Rabbani's government-in-exile.

The Indo-Iranian call for a global mechanism to combat

international terrorism unleashed by the Taliban did not go down well either in Islamabad or Kabul. The Taliban reacted angrily to the Indian Prime Minister's speech at the Majlis, where he said that the Taliban pose a threat to the region.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar also reacted to the Iranian suggestion that Pakistan should work with India and Iran to resolve the Afghan issue. Foreign Minister Sattar said: "The world community has identified eight countries which have to play a role in bringing peace to Afghanistan and India is not among them." What Sattar was referring to is the UN-established "six-plus-two" group of nations which should try and broker an end to the two decades of war in Afghanistan. The six countries are: Pakistan, Iran, China, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The two are the United States and Russia.

Importantly, however, the Indo-Iranian concern about Afghanistan got endorsement from Beijing. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue told reporters on April 15 that "China welcomes and supports all the efforts that are conducive to peaceful resolution of the Afghanistan issue."

## Historic Connections

The Indo-Iranian ties are historic in nature, though they waxed and waned throughout the Cold War. Then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran had visited India in April 1995, and a wide range of discussions had taken place during his visit. It is he who had emphasized the need for strategic cooperation to ward off outside domination in the South Asian and Persian Gulf region. He also underlined the significance of cooperation among Iran, Pakistan, India, and China, to forestall any pretext by hostile foreign forces to interfere in the region.

Then-Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited India in January 1996 for bilateral discussions on various political and economic issues. In October 1996, then-Indian Vice President (now President) K.R. Narayanan visited Iran, and the Iranian Majlis speaker Nateq Nouri visited India in November 1996. During Nouri's visit, an agreement on the formation of a Joint Business Council (JBC) was signed. The election of Mohammad Khatami as President in 1997, and the appointment of Kamal Kharrazi as Iran's new foreign minister opened up the possibility for more fruitful Indo-Iranian ties.

As part of India's new diplomatic thrust in the Islamic world, External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh visited Iran in May 2000. The formal reason for his trip was to attend the 11th meeting of the Indo-Iranian Joint Commission that dealt with bilateral cooperation on a range of issues. These issues covered agriculture, science and technology, industry, communications, transport, energy, and trade. Singh's overtures to the Islamic world in general, and Iran in particular, are part of India's well-formulated national security strategy.

The Indo-Iranian equation is a significant evolving factor affecting regional politics in South and West Asia. In reality,

this brings to the fore a more exciting aspect of India's current foreign policy conducted by the Vajpayee government.

## Broader Security Issues

Over the years, India's relationship with West Asia, and all the Islamic nations in general, had hinged on the Israel-Palestine issue, and India's requirements for oil from that region. Another reason for maintaining friendly relations with West Asia was to soften the impact of Pakistan's anti-India campaign on India's vast Muslim population.

Under Prime Minister Vajpayee, the policy has shifted and widened. India has developed close defense and economic ties with Israel. India is now in the process of developing closer bilateral ties with Turkey. Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to Iran, and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh's visit to Saudi Arabia earlier this year, indicate that India is keen to strengthen its ties with major Islamic nations—representing Turkic, Arab, and Persian ethnic groups—without compromising its relations with Israel or the West. Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani, a staunch advocate of Israeli friendship, will be visiting Turkey soon, news reports indicate.

The strategy of the Vajpayee Administration is now to tie strong knots with West Asia, offering India's infrastructure development capability and its advancement in science and technology, as the barter for energy (oil and gas) and security. This is the reason why Prime Minister Vajpayee announced, while he was in Iran, a credit of \$200 million to help Iran's developmental plan and to shore up its infrastructure development in particular.

In essence, the idea that New Delhi is pursuing is no longer to isolate a Pakistan supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. What New Delhi is seeking is an "extended security" for India. New Delhi has realized that most Islamic nations, if not all of them, are worried about the rise of extremism in the form of Islamic *jihad*. Used by the Western nations in 1980s to drive back the "godless" Soviets from Afghanistan, the believers who were brought into Afghanistan, and trained with deadly weapons, now threaten all the Islamic nations from the southern tip of the Gulf to the borders of Russia. New Delhi, by providing support to the West Asian nations, expects that it will help India to resolve the Kashmir conflict. It is widely acknowledged, as was evident from Iranian religious leader Seyed Ali Khamenei's discussions with Vajpayee, that the Kashmiri extremists are a part of the same terrorist nexus that has destabilized Afghanistan.

The Central Asian region had been a captive market for Indian products. A significant share of Indian goods exported to the erstwhile Soviet Union earlier was used in the Central Asian Republics. Additionally, New Delhi is aware that India could play an important role in developing the technical infrastructure in all the Central Asian countries. Iran, for its part, could provide the Central Asian countries the necessary infrastructure support to promote their external trade.