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## Ahmadinejad's visit to Dehli : a defining moment

M.K. BHADRAKUMAR (India)

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The Indian Cassandras warned the country that the world would regard us as non-serious and whimsical if we befriended Iran. They said India's image was bound to take a knock if it engaged Iran constructively in a spirit of cooperation. That was over a week ago, and it already seems light years away. The coming weeks will be interesting to watch. The high probability is that the international community will understand the course correction in our policy toward Iran.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Delhi, however brief and businesslike, became a defining moment. This is apparent in three directions. First and foremost, India and Iran are putting behind the indifferent patch in their bilateral relationship characteristic of the period 2005-2007. Mr. Ahmadinejad's visit signifies Iran's desire to move forward in its ties with India. Equally, it underscores our jettisoning of an unhappy interregnum when we adopted a neoconservative view of Iran through the prism of our perceived "alliance of values" with the United States.

Of course, one would have wished that the President stayed longer in India and the leadership of the two countries appeared at a joint press conference. But that is perhaps too much to expect at this stage. What is important is that New Delhi has tiptoed back toward the world community, which believes that the International Atomic Energy Agency should be allowed to complete its work on the Iran nuclear issue. The U.S. is finding it impossible to impose punitive sanctions on Iran.

Indeed, within the American opinion itself, there is a growing undercurrent of rethink. At a round table on March 27, five former Secretaries of State - Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Warren Christopher, Madeline Albright and Colin Powell - reached a consensus position that the U.S. should open a line of dialogue with Iran. Ms Albright stressed the importance of finding "common ground"; Mr. Christopher urged American diplomats to explore opening contact; Mr. Baker suggested that the dialogue could centre on a common dilemma - "a dysfunctional Iraq is not something that's in the interest of Iran, there's every incentive on their part to help us, the same way they did in Afghanistan;" Mr. Kissinger urged an open, "unconditional" line of communication; Mr. Powell compared potential talks with the difficult visits he undertook as America's chief diplomat - "They are not always pleasant visits, but you've got to do it". Yet another former Secretary of State, Zbigniew Brzezinski, is a long-time advocate of constructive engagement of Iran.

Indian opinion-makers, therefore, need not panic about U.S. sensitivities if India forges friendship with Iran. In fact, the U.S. stratagem to isolate Iran has proved ineffectual. The "pro-U.S." Arab regimes have sought accommodation with Iran. Turkey works closely with Iran on issues of regional security. Iran has thwarted the covert American attempts to bring about a regime change in Tehran. Meanwhile, the U.S. quagmire in Iraq has enhanced Iran's regional influence. New Delhi has done well to assess the co-relation of forces in the region.

A second aspect that emerged during Mr. Ahmadinejad's visit is the Indian recognition that the Iran gas pipeline project is "doable." It has not come

a day too soon. Alongside, there is reason to believe that the moribund LNG deal with Iran may still be alive and kicking. The LNG deal has a pivotal role in galvanising Indo-Iranian cooperation. Tehran would realise that the deal is much more than a matter of energy cooperation. No doubt, it will act as a spur for all-round expansion of bilateral economic cooperation. Thus, it is possible to say, in a historical perspective, that all factors taken into consideration - soaring oil prices; Iran's swelling capital surplus for investments; its privatisation programme; the consolidation and stability of the Iranian regime; India's concerns over energy security; and Indian companies' emergence as multinational entities - Indo-Iranian cooperation is at the crossroads.

Iran is a key player on the chessboard of energy security. The paradox is that the diminution of Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies is a cornerstone of Washington's trans-Atlantic policy. But such a trend could not be achieved unless Europe accesses Iranian energy. Therefore, time is of the essence in the matter, as Iran is poised to make important choices in the coming months. The U.S.-sponsored Nabucco pipeline project - sourcing gas for Europe via Turkey - could turn out to be Iran's passport for integration with the West. At the same time, Mr. Ahmadinejad is committed to the idea of an Asian energy grid involving Russia, China, India and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the Central Asian gas producing countries - Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan - have agreed to convert to European prices in their contracts with Russia's Gazprom. Again, Iran recently submitted its formal request for membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Furthermore, it has taken the initiative for forming a cartel of gas producing countries on the lines of the OPEC. It is likely to be formed at the seventh ministerial meeting of the Gas Exporting Countries' Forum in Moscow this month. The worst-case scenario for the U.S. would be Iran and Russia now joining hands to coordinate their gas policies and possibly divide the gas market. Nothing less than the viability of the U.S.' post-Cold War trans-Atlantic leadership is in the crosshairs. To be sure, Iran is a high-stakes player in the overall U.S. strategy. That explains why Washington remains obdurate that Iran can be a stakeholder in the international system only if that happens within the ambit of the U.S. strategy.

A third aspect is that Mr. Ahmadinejad's visit ought to inspire us to do some forward thinking. We have always recognised that Iran is a regional power. Iran's large population base; present stage of economic development; diverse resources; and profound intellectual capacity - these combine to augment its profile as a regional power. Also, Iran's unique location makes it a serious player in surrounding regions - the Persian Gulf and West Asia, the Caucasus and the Caspian and Central and South Asia. That is why Indo-Iranian exchanges traditionally assumed a broad character. That tradition must be restored.

Evaluating Mr. Ahmadinejad's talks, Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon said with characteristic modesty that the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project had the potential to be a confidence-building measure among the three countries. This is a timely appreciation, without pride or prejudice, of the geopolitics of the region. But as any serious regional power is wont to do in similar circumstances, India also needs to look beyond and conceptualise how to give a multiplier effect to the impetus provided by the IPI. Beijing's offer to Tokyo of an undersea gas pipeline by way of extending its so-called "East-West Energy Corridor" (connecting Xinjiang and Shanghai), which is under construction, leading eastward from the Caspian and Central Asia to China, is a fascinating example of how to plan ahead for the world of tomorrow.

The concept is of two potential rivals cooperating on energy security in an initiative of regional stability. Perhaps, our neighbours - Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and China - can be brought into the IPI at some stage. At any rate, India must harness its status as an energy transit country. It is too good an opportunity to miss.

Again, it is time for New Delhi to appreciate that the SCO has gained traction. Ukraine, Belarus, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Australia and New Zealand, among others, are queuing up to establish ties with the SCO. Turkey wants nothing short of full SCO membership. Iran and Pakistan, which are already 'observers,' evince interest in full membership. We need to seriously address the issue of India's membership too. Our Central Asia policy should not remain an appendage of the U.S.' "Great Central Asia" strategy - another neocon legacy.

The IPI holds the promise of creating a new ambience in India-Pakistan regional cooperation. We should think of SCO projects to develop transportation corridors connecting Central Asia and South Asia. The SCO is keen to rev up its "Contact Group" with Afghanistan. Conceivably, China and the Central Asian states would be keen on such SCO projects. Afghanistan could become the hub of the SCO's communication links. A political fallout could be a regional initiative under the auspices of the SCO to stabilise the Afghan situation. It is appalling that regional states have left Afghanistan to the U.S. as a laboratory for testing the efficiency of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

These are avenues of Indo-Iranian cooperation that would strengthen regional stability and security, apart from putting in the back burner backlogs of the history of our region. Of course, all this means abandoning "Euro-Atlanticist" obsessions and instead concentrating on the region we live in. Our Cassandras need to get used to the idea that India-Iran dialogue holds great potential. The problem is, like frogs in a well, they see a sliver of the blue sky - studded with stars and stripes. And they think that is the entire sky.

(The writer is a former ambassador belonging to the Indian Foreign Service).

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