

COMMENTARY

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Challenging Times for India's Middle East Policy

S Samuel C Rajiv

Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

The 13 February 2012, attack on an Israeli Embassy vehicle in a high security zone (near the residence of the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh) added a new dimension vis-à-vis India's interactions on the Iranian nuclear program. To India's "three policy determinants" of strategic autonomy, regional strategic stability and national security imperatives vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear program, they added a fourth: internal security complications.

India's three votes against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), despite such factors as hosting Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in New Delhi in April 2008 and its continuing trade and energy cooperation with Iran are evidence of the first determinant at work. "Strategic autonomy" in the Indian lexicon implies an independent streak in foreign policy decision-making, unruffled by external pressures and with sensitivity to India's national interests at its core. Singh had earlier termed it as "an article of faith" for India's foreign policy. It is pertinent to note that he had also termed India's support for the Palestinian cause an "article of faith." This was ahead of his February 2010 visit to Riyadh.

As for the other two determinants, Indian policy makers have been insisting that a nuclear Iran is bad for regional strategic stability and that such an eventuality is not in its interest. It is pertinent to note that while this gels with dominant regional opinion, it is fundamentally different from the position of the current Israeli government, which views a nuclear Iran as an "existential threat." India has also cited the Iran-Pakistan nuclear links and the perils of clandestine proliferation as negatively affecting its national security imperatives.

These three policy determinants continue to be operative in India's interactions vis-à-vis the issue. India for instance did not desist from sending a trade delegation to Iran on 9 March, despite opposition from some US Congressmen, among others. On 6 March the Indian Embassy in Washington, strongly defended India's Iran relations and charged that the criticism its policies were generating were based on a "distorted picture of New Delhi's foreign policy objectives and energy security needs." It further added that "India's relationship with Iran is neither inconsistent with [its] non-proliferation objectives, nor do we seek to contradict the relationships we have with our friends in West Asia or with the US and Europe."

Three Iranians meanwhile have been identified as being responsible for the 13 February terrorist incident – termed a "dastardly attack" by India's Foreign Ministry on 16 March, while announcing that arrest warrants have been issued against them. This followed the arrest of an Indian journalist, Syed Mohammed Kazmi, on 6 March for his alleged role in facilitating the attack.

India's investigating agencies have also charged that the Delhi perpetrators were in contact with the Bangkok cell that had failed to carry out its mission during the coordinated attacks on Israeli targets on 13 February. Iran's Ambassador to India was summoned and Tehran's "cooperation" was sought in the investigations.

The quick progress achieved by the investigations are in tune with the promises of senior Indian policy makers in the immediate aftermath of the attack (including External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna and Home Minister P. Chidambaram) that they would do everything in their power to bring the perpetrators to justice. While Jerusalem will be assuaged by the Delhi Police investigations, the above developments however do not make India's policy choices any easier as regards its Middle East/West Asia policy.

Indian policy makers have been insisting that it is neither feasible nor desirable for India to cut back on Iranian oil imports drastically, given that it is an energy-deficient country dependent on oil imports for the majority of its energy needs. When reports showed that Indian oil imports from Iran had spiked in January 2012, Indian officials pointed out that there has been an overall decline in imports from Iran – from about 14 per cent some years ago to about 10 percent currently. India is also robustly looking to diversify its oil sources, as well as increase supplies from its current suppliers like Saudi Arabia. Riyadh for instance will supply 32 million tons in 2012-13, as against 27 million tons in 2011-12.

Senior US policy makers like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on 29 February 2012, also acknowledged that India was taking "steps that are heading in the right direction." She added

that actions of countries like India were better than “public statements that we sometimes hear them making.”

Against the backdrop of the 24 February 2012, report of the IAEA director-general to the board of governors, ramping up of unilateral sanctions by the US and the EU in December 2011 and January 2012, the weakening of Ahmadinejad’s political position in the aftermath of the 2 March 2012, parliamentary elections, continuing Israeli dilemmas vis-à-vis the issue, and regional political uncertainties as seen by the situation in Syria, the Iranian nuclear issue is at an uncertain cross-roads. The situation therefore could be ripe for a greater role for India as a regional heavyweight, in the mould being played by Turkey, for instance, as a key diplomatic facilitator.

A more direct role for India in the Iranian nuclear issue could be envisaged given that it is being affected by its ramifications across the domestic and national levels, coupled with its key economic and human links in the region it terms “its proximate neighbourhood.”

India’s diplomatic waltz through the maze of Middle East political tensions it seems is set to face even more challenging times. If the recent past is any indication – with New Delhi managing to maintain robust ties with Jerusalem, Riyadh and Washington along with continuing trade and energy cooperation with Tehran, it would seem it could still pull it off.

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The author is associate fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. Views expressed are his own.

Email: samuelrajiv@gmail.com

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