

## Israel and India: Iran's needless hullabaloo

Following the launch of Israeli spy satellite TECSAR from Indian facilities, the publicly-aired criticism of India's ties with 'the Zionist state' by Iranian government officials should have produced outcries of gratuitous interference. However, no one has asked why Iran chose to go to the media with its unhappiness instead of resorting to the standard diplomatic practice of issuing a demarche to the Indian ambassador in Tehran. Nobody has challenged Iran's presumed right to dish out veiled warnings to India over its foreign policy preferences.

Sovereignty in world affairs springs largely from the ability of a country to conduct its foreign relations free of external meddling. Actual global power differences, of course, reduce this principle to mere theoretical worth. India has often been pressurised by larger powers to take foreign policy decisions that it would not countenance in an ideally free environment.

For instance, it is now known from the horse's mouth that the US forced India to vote against Iran at the IAEA in September 2005 and February 2006. Stephen G. Rademaker, the former US assistant secretary for non-proliferation, declared: 'I am the first person to admit that the votes were coerced.'

Despite the touchiness about American influence on Indian foreign policy, it is an undeniable reality. India's frequent attempts to negotiate with Pakistan even when the latter is sponsoring cross-border terrorism are believed to be at the prodding of the US.

That the US had enough leverage over India to ensure that it 'did not vote the wrong way' on Iran's alleged nuclear misdemeanour may seem self-evident, given the power differential between Washington and New Delhi. A somewhat similar situation existed during the later part of the Cold War when Moscow often prevailed over [New Delhi](#) through a systematic strategy of bribing Indian political parties, individual politicians, newspapers, trade unions and intellectuals.

The Mitrokhin Archives, released in 2005, revealed that India was a veritable 'playground' of Soviet intelligence. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's refusal to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980 was just one obvious manifestation of Soviet coercion on a putatively 'non-aligned' country.

Iran's pot shots at India over its relations with Israel are more surprising, given that it is a relatively weaker state compared to the US or Russia. Tehran has even threatened New Delhi to speed up or miss the bus of the delayed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline.

Earlier in February, Iran's foreign affairs spokesman announced that China was ready to replace India if the latter does not put its act together and sort out technical differences with Pakistan. What is the leverage point that Iran enjoys over India to be so aggressive? Iran accounts for a little more than 7.5 percent of India's crude oil imports, far behind Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates.

The likelier source of confidence that Tehran can deter New Delhi from developing relations with Tel Aviv comes from its acute understanding of vote bank politics, which has frequently plagued Indian foreign policy. Iran's objections to the TECSAR launch were phrased in a manner that appealed to the friendly sentiments towards Muslim countries that move a particular section of Indian society.

The cultural affinity thesis, closely allied to vote bank politics, was indeed one of the root causes of

India's belated normalisation of relations with Israel. For decades, the argument went that befriending Tel Aviv would enrage Arab states and, by extension, hurt the feelings of minorities in India.

Notwithstanding the concrete benefits that an opening to Israel would accrue to India, fear of losing votes held back politicians in New Delhi for a very long time. Iran draws leverage from this internal weakness of India and finds support for its posturing on TECSAR from some Indian political parties, most of which have never been immune from foreign inducements of one shade or the other. Ironically, Iran did not protest the rising interactions between Pakistan and Israel that are being brokered by the US!

Tehran was apparently 'jolted and horrified' by the news of Pakistani and Israeli foreign ministers meeting in Paris in 2005. However, unlike the TECSAR case, Iran did not publicly castigate Pakistan. If the overall intent of Iran's trespassing in the TECSAR case is to isolate Israel, it has failed to realise that Tel Aviv has managed to break the ice with numerous Muslim countries, what to talk of India.

Israel's cooperation benefits India. Tel Aviv has equipped New Delhi with the Phalcon early warning radar system. This state-of-the-art technology enhances the Indian Air Force's reconnaissance and interception capabilities. But for American stymieing, India would already have received the Arrow-II anti-ballistic missile defence system from Israel. The Indian Army uses Israeli aerial vehicles and electronic sensors to fence the border with Pakistan. Israel supplies India with sophisticated counter-terrorism expertise to tackle infiltration from Pakistan.

With so much to show on the credit side of the balance sheet for India-Israel relations, the Iranian hue and cry over TECSAR pales. For the record, India has expressed concern about the humanitarian crisis engulfing Palestinians in Gaza. India has never approved of disproportionate use of force by Israel in its disputes with Muslim neighbours. The charge that India is adding diplomatic license for Israel to continue its impunity does not stand. All India has been doing since 1992, when it formally recognised Israel, is to look out for its own interests.

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