

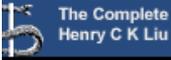
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India seeks 'velvet divorce' from Iran

By M K Bhadrakumar

Amid the rubble of the Middle East policy of the George W Bush-Ehud Olmert duo, there has been a true success story. The United States and Israel have largely succeeded in snatching India from the "other" side of the Middle Eastern geopolitical divide. This became evident more than once in the past week.

On October 26, US forces based in Iraq attacked the Syrian border village of Sukkaryiah. The attack triggered outrage regionally. Even the Arab League, which has an ambivalent attitude toward Damascus, felt compelled to condemn Washington. But Delhi looked away. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who paid a five-day visit to India in June - the first visit by a Syrian head of state in more than three decades - must be bemused why Delhi didn't say at least what was so patently



obvious, namely, it is wrong to violate the territorial integrity of a sovereign country.

Only in June had an Indian spokesman claimed that Assad's visit "further consolidated the excellent relations that exist between India and Syria and identified new areas of bilateral cooperation".

This dichotomy in India's diplomacy with regard to the Muslim Middle East - excellent photo opportunities not quite translating as official policy and ultimately degenerating as publicity exercises in the competitive environment of Indian politics - was again on display during the weekend visit to Tehran by Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, from October 31 to November 2.



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Kashmir issue in focus

Mukherjee's visit was badly timed. Only a few weeks had passed since Delhi hosted two visits by the Israeli and US army chiefs, Avi Mizrahi and George Casey, to the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in a clear policy departure from past practice. The visits marked a quantum leap in US-Israel-India security cooperation. It provoked some sharp comments in the official Iranian media - about Delhi opening the door to Israeli and US involvement in the "Kashmir problem" against the backdrop of the Islamic militancy in the adjoining Pakistani tribal areas and in Afghanistan.

Just four days before Mukherjee arrived in Tehran, the Tehran Times newspaper, which is credited with reflecting Iranian thinking, featured an article roundly condemning the Indian stance on the Kashmir issue. Titled "The Black Day of Kashmir - 61 years of pain", the article was ostensibly meant to coincide with the anniversary of the Indian military intervention in Kashmir on October 27, 1947, which it called "one of the darkest chapters in the history of South Asia".

The article amounted to an unvarnished endorsement of the Pakistani point of view. It said, "India continues to defy the world by denying Kashmiris their inalienable right to determine their destiny ... The atmosphere of tension in India-Pakistan relations has engendered instability and insecurity in South Asia. The urgency of the situation and the need to resolve the dispute as soon as possible cannot be over-emphasized ... The world's Muslims will always stand by the Kashmiris until they succeed in their struggle to attain the right to self-determination."

The lengthy article recalled Iran's "deep-rooted spiritual and cultural bonds with the people of Kashmir" and went on to fondly underscore that in Tehran, Kashmir is known as "Little Iran" - *Kashmir-Iran-e-saghir*.

Such rhetoric on the eve of a foreign minister-level visit from India hardly served the purpose of a "curtain-raiser", except to warn Delhi in advance that it cannot be business as usual in Iran-India relations and that the chill in bilateral ties and the dissipation of mutual understanding must not be lightly taken as a mere hiccup. Simply put, if Delhi's intention was to project a semblance of normalcy in India's relations with Iran and to create a favorable impact thereby on Muslim opinion in India, Tehran decided it would not play ball.

Washington and Tel Aviv must be quietly chuckling. Up until some three years ago, there was a constant refrain in India-Iran political exchanges - that their relationship constituted a factor of peace and stability in the region. But the mantra was completely lacking in the pronouncements of the two sides during Mukherjee's visit. The two countries are drifting apart.

Indian naval deployment

Mukherjee candidly admitted that "in this changing context, we need to look at India-Iran relations afresh". Indeed, that "context" is dramatically changing. A fortnight before the visit, Delhi deployed for the first time ever a warship in the Persian Gulf region, which will operate in close coordination with the Western navies under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the region.

Mukherjee assertively said in Tehran, "India has a natural and abiding stake in the safety and security of the sea lanes of communication from the Malacca Strait to the Persian Gulf."

But Delhi didn't consult Tehran beforehand. Delhi instead approached Oman for assistance in berthing facilities for its warship. Tehran, meanwhile, views the Western naval

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deployments in the Persian Gulf with alarm. Last week, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mohammadi criticized the expansion of NATO to the east and called on regional governments to "distance themselves from competitive and hostile policies".

Tehran would have most certainly noted Delhi's decision to host a large-scale naval exercise with the US along India's western coast in late October in which the nuclear-powered American aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan and US nuclear submarines and frigates participated. Iran has since announced the opening of a new naval base in the southern port of Jask in the eastern part of the Strait of Hormuz. According to the chief of the Iranian navy, Admiral Habibollah Sayari, "With this new naval base, a new line of defense was created in the Persian Gulf. If necessary, we can prevent any enemy from entering the Persian Gulf's strategic area."

Sayari announced that Iran proposed to build yet another naval base to establish "an impenetrable line of defense at the entrance to the Sea of Oman". He added, "If the enemy goes insane, we will drown them at the bottom of the Indian Ocean and the Sea of Oman before they reach the Strait of Hormuz and the entrance to the Persian Gulf." Curiously, the Iranian announcement coincided with the consultations of Indian National Security Advisor M K Narayanan in Oman regarding an Indian proposal that the sultanate provide berthing facilities for the Indian warship deployed in the region.

Though Mukherjee's visit to Tehran ended on Sunday, it has not yet been revealed whether President Mahmud Ahmadinejad received him. A call on the Iranian president - and, perhaps Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei - was customary for visiting Indian foreign ministers in the halcyon days of the India-Iran strategic partnership. In another sign of the change in the Iranian mood, Tehran "downgraded" the Joint Economic Commission with India. Mottaki is no longer its co-chairman, as is the practice with Iran's other major interlocutors and partner countries.

Thus, a series of icebergs has been lately slicing through the hull of the Titanic that used to be the grand old India-Iran "strategic partnership". A disaster was waiting to happen ever since India voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency three years ago following US President George W Bush's entreaties with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Pipedream of energy cooperation

At the root of it lies unprecedented US-Israeli interference in India's Iran policy. Such interference is nothing new since the early 1990s, when Delhi established diplomatic relations with Israel. Delhi skillfully navigated the relationship with Iran, despite the robust growth of ties with Israel on a parallel track.

However, things began changing three to four years ago as Indian foreign policy in the region began getting more "security-centric" and Israel was elevated as a pivotal relationship. Today, in the

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