

India sends mixed s

By Peter J Brown

India shares the US' vision of wanting to keep Iran from going nuclear, but differs on how to achieve that goal. Setting its deep cultural and business links to Tehran - and need for its oil - against its desire for US links, New Delhi is sending out mixed signals, voting for sanctions while questioning their effectiveness

IT is easy to misread the signals India's leadership is frantically sending out concerning the imposition of sanctions over Iran's nuclear programme. India has been commended by the United States for its record of backing sanctions votes, though Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has consistently doubted they can work.

At the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) board of governors, India has cast three votes against Iran over its failure to meet international obligations. And shortly after the recent India-US Strategic Dialogue, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns commended India for its "admirable" record when it came to implementing previous UN Security Council resolutions. He said that he fully expected India to "follow through and implement the new resolution".

In Toronto in late June as the Group of 20 (G-20) summit closed, US President Barack Obama directed this curious comment at Manmohan:

And I can tell you that here at the G-20, when the prime minister speaks people listen, particularly because of his deep knowledge of economic issues, as well as the fact that he understands that as India rises as a world power, not just a regional power, that it also has enormous responsibilities to work with the rest of the world community around issues of peace and prosperity.

If everyone were really listening to Manmohan as closely as Obama described, the latest round of sanctions at the United Nations Security Council would have never been approved, let alone proposed in the first place.

Manmohan has been quite consistent. Following a nuclear security summit in April, for example, he openly questioned the effectiveness of the

planned sanctions, and shared his concern that the poor and not the power elite in Tehran would suffer.

Manmohan once again reminded Obama that India viewed Iran as also "entitled to all the rights that members who have signed the NPT [nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] and are peaceful users of atomic energy, are entitled to".

Manmohan words were well chosen, and Obama knew immediately that India had no plan to abandon Iran entirely.

"India has adopted an ambiguous approach towards Iran in recent years," said Rajeswari Rajagopalan, senior fellow in security studies at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi. "On the one hand, India wants to work the Iran option, given the growing demand for energy resources. But on the other hand, it has also had problems with Iran's clandestine nuclear activities, especially the Pakistan link, and thus follows Washington's lead in supporting sanctions against Tehran."

The Pew Research Center in its most recent Global Attitudes Survey released in June injected an element of considerable uncertainty into the mix by exposing how few threads connect India's leaders to the Indian people over what to do about Iran.

What leaps out is that among those in India who oppose Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, there is greater support for the use of military force than for tougher economic sanctions.

"Just over half (52%) of Indians who would not like to see a nuclear-armed Tehran -

Indians oppose Iran in this regard by a margin of 48% to 33%. - say it is more important to stop it from acquiring nuclear weapons, even if it means taking military action; 39% say avoiding a military conflict with Iran is more important," said the survey's authors.

Even more confounding is the simultaneous 10 percentage point drop in the overall US favorability rating in India since a year ago - only Mexico experienced a larger drop. Controversy over the US granting Indian investigators access to David Coleman Headley - a key suspect in the November 2008 Mumbai terror attack - might explain the 17 percentage point drop in the number of Indians who favour the US-led effort to fight terrorism,

to 65%. India's overall favorability rating of the American people remained unchanged.

The Indian and American governments share a common vision on Iran to the extent that neither wants to see a nuclear Iran. However, the two countries differ on the best way to achieve that goal. "While India feels that a nuclear Iran is not in the interest of regional stability, New Delhi is keen that the US and the international community use dialogue and diplomacy to resolve Iran's nuclear issue," said Rajagopalan.

As much as the US wants to include India on its list of staunch supporters willing to bear down hard on Iran, India resists being included, and its resistance is likely to grow rather than diminish in light of the US's relatively muted response to China's nuclear deal for two new nuclear reactors with Pakistan.

"It would be naive to assume that India and the US are on the same page

said Sourabh Gupta, senior research associate at Samuels International Associates in Washington, DC.

It does not help that the US prefers to ignore Iran's status as the second biggest supplier of crude oil to India. Iran could also become a major supplier of natural gas to India, although the India section of the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline deal is dead in the water for now. And while Obama has been to Ankara and Cairo - and perhaps soon Jakarta - in his attempts to strengthen US ties to the many Muslim communities around the world, he will have to be especially diplomatic in his choice of words when he arrives in New Delhi in November.

"India is home to nearly 160 million Muslims consisting of both Shia and Sunni. Friendly relations with Iran is crucial to maintaining credibility in the Islamic world at home and abroad to counter Pakistan's influence, a country that does not have a close rela-

'India has adopted an ambiguous approach towards Iran. On the one hand, India wants to work the Iran option, demand for energy resources. But on the other hand, it problems with Iran's clandestine nuclear activities, esp link, and thus follows Washington's lead in supporting Tehran,' says Rajeswari Rajagopalan, senior fellow in the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi

regarding Iran sanctions. First, India does not see Iran as a threat. There are no major disputes between them. On the contrary, India has always had generally friendly relations and also business and cultural ties," said Subrata Ghoshroy, a research associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Programme in Science, Technology, and Society.

Over the past few weeks, there has been a growing suspicion, rightly or wrongly, that the US stands ready to quietly cast a less stringent eye on Sino-Pakistani nuclear dealings in exchange for Chinese cooperation on the Iranian brief at the Security Council. "This pattern of deal-cutting above Indian heads - mildly reminiscent of the [president Bill] Clinton years - continues to grate on Indian nerves, and is likely to forestall any effort by PM Singh to deepen the US-India link on Iran,"

relationship with Iran," said Ghoshroy.

Many Indians accept that their national security interests are better served by maintaining good relations with Iran, and contend that any strict sanctions, including maritime interdictions and inspections, will exacerbate tensions in a region that is already volatile - right in India's backyard.

India has been realistic, however, in addressing US concerns, and for that reason the confidence expressed by Burns and others is not entirely misplaced. US-India relations have reached a new high - though the Pew survey deflates this image somewhat - and cooperation on the non-proliferation/civil nuclear front is prized in New Delhi.

"Mindful of the fact that Iran constitutes a core US security concern, the Singh government has over the past couple of years - coinciding with the Iranian case being reported to the

signals on Iran

Security Council - maintained a relative standstill in functional bilateral cooperation with Tehran," said Gupta. "At minimum, the Road Map to [Bilateral] Strategic Cooperation that it had inherited from the predecessor [Atal Bihari] Vajpayee-led government has not been deepened."

Besides, India's commercial interests rank the size and scope of any business opportunities in the US far above any in Iran.

"So long as US-Iranian relations remain in a deepening spiral and Iran in contravention of security council resolutions, Indian voting behaviour at the IAEA board is likely to loosely shadow the US's and discretion in outreach to Tehran will remain the watchword in New Delhi," said Gupta.

In contrast, China has been able to bargain both politically with the US within the Security Council while also simultaneously benefiting commercially with the Iranians. This does not go unnoticed in New Delhi.

"India has continued to argue that pricing is a major impediment in taking the IPI initiative forward, while not making officially clear its position on the issue. It may be under the US influence that it is not pursuing the pipeline at this point of time, however, New Delhi has not ruled out this option for the future, given the growing demand for gas," said Rajagopalan. "This will necessitate India to keep this option for the future given that Iran has the second largest reserve of natural gas. On this, India should look to the example set by Turkey, and pursue it through third countries and swap deals."

As far as the war in Afghanistan is concerned, the US faces very tough choices. India's patience with the current US-Pakistan relationship may be wearing thin despite a new round of talks, and it is no secret that India would welcome a significant reduction in the US dependence on Pakistan as the ultimate answer in the war on terror.

Beyond that, there are those who call from within India for the US to bring Iran on board on this and other issues. Critics of the status quo want the US to become more sensible about Iran, and to embrace the work done by Brazil and Turkey and others. Ignoring Iran's ancient roots, its cultural influence, and the importance of its role as a regional power in the least places Iraq's future in jeopardy, among other things.

"This is not a quick-fix solution," said Rajagopalan. "Both the governments need to invest time and effort looking at long-term benefits of bringing a positive direction to this relationship."

Reaching out to Tehran would solve two problems in one shot, the argument goes. It would bolster Iran's regional power status, and an overall rapprochement with Washington might also bring an end to Tehran's nuclear issue as well.

"Washington has to move beyond Islamabad and consider other options that are available or that can be made available in the near future. Iran could prove to be an alternative, which Washington should work on," said Rajagopalan.

Washington is reluctant to listen to this advice at a time when US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates is warning that Iran is fast becoming a military dictatorship. The element

of risk that is present for the Singh government is enormous. If it simply signs on to the US agenda at a time when the US position is growing more bellicose - perhaps using the Pew survey results to support this shift - it might come to regret this move.

"Because [Manmohan's] government appears to be operating at a point close to the Indian polity's and policy of strategic autonomy's - threshold of tolerance in bending to the will of Washington vis-a-vis Iran, his scope of maneuver is limited," said Gupta. "The inability to sustain indefinitely this domestic consensus is likely to be aggravated by the perception that the current US administration is edging away from the favourable lens through which it has viewed India for much of the past decade."

Manmohan's own domestic political concerns are amplified by Obama's pending trip to India. "Ratings of Obama are also overwhelmingly positive in Japan (76%), South Korea (75%), India (73%) and Indonesia (67%)," the survey reported.

Manmohan is caught between a rock and a hard place. He must be careful not to push too hard on Iran, and he must prepare for Obama's arrival. The lifting of export controls and other important issues loom in the background.

"[Manmohan] still leads a coalition government which is proving to be more fractious than previously anticipated. Cozying up to America will not be seen as a popular policy," said Ghoshroy.

India's commitment to adhere to the basic outline of UN resolutions on Iran is not in doubt, but India's record of technological achievements and how exactly these came about cannot be ignored completely.

"Clearly, US and Indian interests are different. It is true, India has publicly stated that an Iran with nuclear weapons will be harmful for the region, but it cannot say it too loudly given its own track record in developing the nuclear bomb," said Ghoshroy. "Indian scientists were proud in how they busted the US sanctions imposed after 1974 and tightened after 1998, and developed the bomb." Obama may soon meet a few of those same scientists.

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option, given the growing hand, it has also had ties, especially the Pakistan supporting sanctions against fellow in security studies at Delhi

As China pushes forward, India is in a quandary - reluctant at best to abandon future-oriented energy cooperation with Tehran, and so, for example, the framework of their joint working group on oil and gas is sustained, but pragmatic enough to exclude itself from making any new or immediate investments.

"India continues to maintain a distinction between UN and unilateral US sanctions on Iran. But in this regard too, the red lines established here by the US are known and internalised: no new, large hydrocarbon investments in Iran; no assistance to the regime to meet its refining deficiencies; no high-profile military exchanges or defence-industrial cooperation with Tehran," said Gupta.

The war in Afghanistan and the IPI pipeline are important considerations here, too, but for different reasons.