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The Associated Press

Iran draws India closer with talks on Afghanistan

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India, Iran and Afghanistan will hold talks on giving greater access to landlocked Afghanistan, a move that could also ease Iran's isolation in the region, Indian officials said Saturday.

The three countries will meet Sunday to discuss how best to utilize the southeastern Iranian port of Chahbahar and develop road and rail links from there to Afghanistan, Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai told reporters.

As NATO troops prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014, India fears the possibility of the country falling into the hands of a Taliban-led regime, thus endangering many of India's interests there.

Video from around the world

India has been one of the largest contributors of development aid to Afghanistan. Over the past decade, it has spent more than \$2 billion to help build infrastructure, including roads, power projects and hospitals.

For India the shortest and most economical route for sending supplies to Afghanistan would be by road through Pakistan, but its decades-long rival has denied New Delhi road access to Kabul, making the route through Iran all the more significant.

Iran is also hoping to develop an industrial zone near Chahbahar port and wants to attract foreign investment to set up industries there, Mathai said.

The trilateral talks come days ahead of a non-aligned summit meeting hosted by Iran in which leaders of some 120 countries are expected to participate.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who will be in Tehran to attend the summit, is to hold bilateral talks with Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the sidelines.

India's closer cooperation with Iran will likely offend the United States, which has been pushing the international community to punish Iran over its nuclear program.

India has come under increasing pressure from Washington over its ties with Iran, but New Delhi needs Iranian crude supplies to power its economic growth. Iran supplies about 12 percent of India's energy needs.

India's talks with Iran will explore ways to expand trade to improve the heavily skewed balance of trade between the two countries, Mathai said.

Two-way trade in the last year totaled about \$16 billion, of which Indian oil imports from Iran accounted for \$13.5 billion.

Mathai said India would accept sanctions imposed by the United Nations, but would not heed those imposed by others, referring to harsher sanctions maintained by the United States and Europe.

India has been gradually cutting its oil imports from Iran, buying more from Iraq and Kuwait. But with nearly 70 percent of its oil consumption supplied by imports, rapid shifts are difficult.

Read more here: <http://www.thestate.com/2012/08/25/2412189/iran-draws-india-closer-with-talks.html#.UDkA3qAn0z0#storylink=cpy>