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The Hindu

In search of Afghan peace, India reaches out to Iran

By Praveen Swami

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Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has accepted an invitation to travel to Iran, opening the way for the first visit to the country by an Indian head of government in a decade.

India's announcement came after a bilateral meeting between Dr. Singh and Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Friday, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai told journalists that the two leaders had agreed to set up a joint commission on economic issues, discussed bilateral industrial projects, and reviewed regional security issues.

Even though the Prime Minister is unlikely to announce early dates for a visit, which, diplomatic sources told The Hindu, Iran had been pressing for since 2009, the announcement is significant in the context of the growing power of the Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan — the cause of deep concern in both New Delhi and Shi'a-majority Iran.

The United States, though deeply hostile to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities and its geostrategic ambitions, has been calling for regional states to participate in a dialogue aimed at building a stable future for Afghanistan. Iran has substantial influence with Afghan groups in the country's west and, along with India and Russia, was part of a group of nations which backed the anti-Taliban resistance before 2001.

“Let's put it this way,” a U.S. government source told The Hindu, “whatever our problems with Iran might be, we welcome whatever India can do to persuade Iran to play a constructive role.”

Mr. Mathai, for his part, said, “Both India and Iran feel that the dispensation that emerges in Afghanistan should be Afghan-led, and that regional actors can support that process.”

Fraught relationship

India's relationship with Iran stands in stark contrast with Tehran's fraught relationship with Washington — signs of which were evident on Thursday, when an incendiary speech by Mr. Ahmadinejad led dozens of diplomats to walk out of the General Assembly.

Iran's President insinuated that the U.S. might itself have carried out the 9/11 attacks to provide a pretext for its intervention in the Middle East. He added European states use the Holocaust as a pretext for providing aid to Israel. Mark Kornblau, a spokesperson for the U.S., attacked Mr. Ahmadinejad's “abhorrent anti-Semitic slurs and despicable conspiracy theories.”

Last year, the U.N. Security Council voted 10-2 to impose harsh sanctions on Iran to punish its pursuit of nuclear weapons. The U.S. separately passed a law imposing wide-ranging sanctions that targeted Iran's banking, energy and export sectors.

Even though India backed the sanctions vote, it continued to engage Iran diplomatically. National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon visited the country in March, while both External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna and the former Foreign Secretary, Nirupama Rao, did so in 2010.

Lost opportunities

Iran's relationship with the West, by contrast, has been dogged by missteps and lost opportunities ever since the revolution of 1979 brought a clerical-dominated regime to power. In the wake of 9/11, though, new opportunities emerged.

Faced with the opportunity to cooperate with the U.S. against their common jihadist adversaries in Afghanistan, and fearful of the regime-threatening power demonstrated during the war in Iraq, Iran stepped up counter-terrorism cooperation and suspended its secret uranium enrichment programme.

Later, in 2003, Iranian leaders attempted secret peace proposals through Switzerland's ambassador to Tehran. In return for civilian atomic technology and an end to sanctions, the Iranians offered to stop supporting terrorist groups and to make their nuclear programme transparent.

President George Bush, however, cast Iran as part of the “axis of evil” and spurned its overtures. Later, though, the U.S. became too mired in Iraq and Afghanistan for the Iranians to feel vulnerable — and Tehran resumed its nuclear pursuit.

In recent months, the prospects of a pragmatic engagement between the U.S. and Iran have been further dimmed by a bitter power struggle between Mr. Ahmadinejad and the country's supreme theological leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei. Both sides have sought to buttress their ideological legitimacy by taking increasingly aggressive anti-western positions.