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NONPROLIFERATION TRIP REPORT

India

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Bruce Riedel*

I visited India in February 2008 with a Brookings Study Tour, traveling for two weeks in Mumbai (Bombay), Bangalore, Udaipur, and New Delhi. The issue of nuclear proliferation in “West Asia,” as Indians call the Middle East, came up with business leaders, government officials, and members of the media with whom I met. In addition, around the time I was in India, the U.S.-Indian civil nuclear deal (announced in July 2005 and aimed at strengthening U.S.-Indian energy cooperation and providing U.S. assistance to India’s civilian nuclear energy program), stalled due to the opposition of communist members of the governing coalition. This provided a natural introduction for discussing the danger of further nuclear proliferation in the region, specifically in Iran.

Some in the United States have strongly criticized India for maintaining strong economic relations with Iran and for having exchanges of low-level military delegations (largely limited to unimportant navigation exercises and port visits by their navies). U.S. disapproval is also based on the fact that in 2003 Iran and India signed the “New Delhi Declaration” that sought to improve relations, especially on energy issues, and recently, there has been talk of constructing an ambitious gas pipeline from Iran to India. This has led some in the United States to suggest that the U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear deal should be held hostage to a break in Indo-Iranian relations.

Although India has historic ties to Iran and has great cultural affinity for Persia—partly based on the fact that India has the second largest Shi’i Muslim population in the world after Iran—I think these concerns are overdrawn. India naturally does not want to be estranged from a major energy exporter, so it is not surprising that

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India is interested in how Iranian natural gas can be exported to its domestic market. Any pipeline to do so, however, is years, if not decades, from being built. At the same time, India has made it very clear that it does not want to see Iran develop nuclear weapons. Most notably, India sided with the U.S. on two important International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) votes on the Iran issue in the last couple of years. India takes the position that Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and must now live up to its commitments under the treaty (unlike India which never signed the NPT). Therefore, India has supported United Nations Security Council resolutions calling on Iran to live up to those commitments. As one senior Indian official put it, India does not want to see a second Muslim country to its west attain a nuclear weapons capability.

Despite India's opposition to a nuclear Iran, many with whom I spoke said this does not mean India favors the military option against Iran. India almost certainly would be highly critical of a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities whether by the U.S. or Israel. New Delhi will stand by the United States for gradual and targeted sanctions, but not the use of force.

Perhaps ironic to some, there are certain Indo-Iranian partnerships that may benefit U.S. interests in the region. Both India and Iran were targets of the Taliban government's promotion of terrorism and welcomed the fall of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. As a result, India and Iran have joined in support of Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul. This Indo-Iranian cooperation and assistance of the Karzai government is in the U.S. national security interest.

The Indian relationship with Iran should also be seen in the context of the Indian relationship with Israel. That relationship has evolved considerably in the last fifteen years. In the 1990s, President Clinton encouraged Israel to reach out to India and build a strategic partnership. The Bush team has continued this approach. As a result, Israeli military sales to India are now averaging over \$1.5bn per annum, over one third of Israel's exports of military equipment. The Israelis provide India with its most sophisticated new technology, including airborne early-warning radars and long-range radars. There are also regular exchanges of high-level military delegations. India's ties with Israel in the military field have replaced the previous close Israeli military relationship with China. The two countries are also close partners in space with India providing the commercial launch vehicle for Israel's newest and most sophisticated spy satellite in January 2008.

Americans need to have a complex and complete grasp of the new directions in India's foreign policy. As our own strategic partnership with India grows in the coming years, we will need expertise in understanding the dynamics of India's external affairs and diplomats with the skill to manage what will be one of the most important bilateral relations of the 21st century. The Iran nuclear issue and Indo-Iranian ties will need to be managed in the context of this larger strategic imperative. We should encourage those parts of the India-Iran relationship that favor our interests while discretely pressing against those we consider dangerous.