

## Keeping friends close

In a recent interview, former Vice-President Hamid Ansari said, “Our relationship with Iran has been built carefully by all past governments as Iran for us is not just an energy supplier... For us, Iran is a land power on the other side of Pakistan that provides us with an alternative route to Afghanistan.” Mr. Ansari, veteran diplomat and Ambassador to Iran in the 1990s, made these remarks in response to the threat by the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, that unless India drastically reduces its energy imports from Iran by November 4, it would be subject to American sanctions.

Ms. Haley’s threat reflects the Trump administration’s hubris and is an insult to Indian sovereignty. More importantly, it is in direct conflict with India’s strategic interests in the region. Even during the heyday of the Central Treaty Organisation and the Regional Cooperation for Development, which counted both Iran and Pakistan as members, India was careful not to alienate Iran.

The Shah visited India in 1969 and 1974. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Iran in 1974 following her Special Envoy P.N. Haksar’s visit to Iran in 1973 that successfully allayed the Shah’s fears that India wanted to dismember Pakistan in the wake of the Bangladesh War.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 brought a sea change in Tehran’s foreign policy, which came to identify the U.S. as its principal adversary. Given Pakistan’s close relations with the U.S. following the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, the Iranian leadership was suspicious of Pakistan and its President. In a conversation with me in early 1981, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then Speaker of the Iranian Majlis, referred to Zia-ul-Haq, literally the “light of truth”, as Zia-ul-Batil meaning “the light of falsehood”.

Unfortunately, India was unable to take full advantage of Iran’s new anti-Pakistan orientation despite repeated exhortations by the then Indian Ambassador to Tehran, Akbar Mirza Khaleeli, for several reasons. First, New Delhi was worried that increasing closeness with Tehran could provoke adverse reactions from the U.S., especially after Iranian students held American embassy staff hostage for months. Second, Indian policymakers were apprehensive of the Islamic content of the Iranian revolution. They were unable to decipher that this nomenclature meant very little as far as India-Iran relations were concerned and that Iran’s new policy of non-alignment converged with Indian stances in the region. As Rafsanjani pointed out, the only difference between the Indian and Iranian approach to non-alignment was that “for India it is a policy, for Iran it is a creed”.

Recently, India-Iran relations have improved considerably because of growing energy and trade dependency and greater recognition on both sides of the conjunction of strategic interests. India should not allow relations with a potential regional ally to be disrupted by empty American threats.

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