

SLIPPERY SLOPE: ON INDIA AND IRAN DEVELOPMENTS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

Iranian Foreign Minister [Javad Zarif was in New Delhi this week](#) as part of a regional outreach that includes Russia, China, Turkmenistan and Iraq amid rising tensions in West Asia. The U.S. has followed withdrawal of its sanctions-waiver for Iranian oil with a series of actions that it claims are in response to the perceived threat from Iran. It has recalled all non-emergency diplomatic staff based in neighbouring Iraq; sent an aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln, missile defence hardware and B-52 bombers to the Gulf; imposed fresh sanctions on various Iranian entities; and slapped a terror designation for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iran has matched some of the rhetoric with threats that it would close off the Strait of Hormuz to trade and treat the U.S. carrier as a legitimate “target” if it came anywhere close to Iranian waters. Making matters worse, it is clear that the U.S. aims to pin on the Iranian government and military forces blame for attacks on two Saudi Arabian oil tankers over the weekend. U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton’s remark that “any attack on United States interests or those of [its] allies will be met with unrelenting force” gives the impression that the ground is being prepared by the U.S., aided by Saudi Arabia and Israel, for an escalation.

Given the signs of a gathering storm, India must consider not only its own interests in terms of its ties with Iran and with the U.S. and its allies, but also its position as a regional power. The External Affairs Ministry comment that the government would take a decision on Iranian oil imports after the elections appeared to be an attempt to buy time. The truth is that Indian oil importers have already stopped placing orders for Iranian oil in compliance with the U.S. diktat on “zeroing out” imports. India had been importing about 10% of its oil requirements from Iran, and the losses in terms of finding alternative suppliers in the face of rising oil prices are piling up. News reports also indicate that despite a U.S. waiver on the Chabahar port, banks in India and Afghanistan that planned to finance trade through the port are now being restricted by U.S. sanctions. Instead of being a mute spectator to the crisis that is building for India’s energy bill as well as for regional stability, New Delhi must take the challenge head-on. One immediate priority is to work more closely with European countries in ensuring that Iran does not feel compelled to walk out of the nuclear deal, and to jointly build a sanctions-immune financial infrastructure to facilitate Iranian trade. It is necessary that the countries affected in the region meet urgently, as well as unitedly express concerns over a possible U.S.-Iran clash.

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