

WHY IRAN MATTERS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

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Sep 10, 2020-Thursday

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India's external affairs and defence ministers recently dropped by Iran and talked to their counterparts, the first such talks since the pandemic began. Afghanistan, rather than oil supplies, tops the agenda, reflecting the new contours of the bilateral relationship. New Delhi and Tehran have reason to worry about the slow-but-steady withdrawal of United States (US) troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban resurgence that will follow. While Iran has its own problems with the US, and won't be unhappy that the US troop presence along its northern border is winding down, it has reason to be concerned at the prospect of the present Kabul regime weakening. Tehran is known to have engaged with some Taliban leaders, but remains suspicious of its more hardcore factions, which are often intertwined with the Islamic State Khorasan Province and both are deeply anti-Shia.

New Delhi's views converge as these same Taliban factions are also the closest to Rawalpindi. At a time when Iran's economy is stressed by sanctions and low oil prices, and its military stretched by deployments in Iraq and Syria, an unstable Afghanistan would not be welcome. The two countries need to coordinate their support for the Kabul regime. The partly India-funded freight corridor from Chabahar to Herat is the most tangible symbol of Afghan-related cooperation. The next few years will require such cooperation to expand into other spheres. As India's energy ambitions revolve around weaning itself off oil and gas usage, there will be less traction to be gained in the energy sphere. But there will be more work to be done in the realm of regional security.

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