

Will India & Iran Ally with Kabul Against the Taliban?

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Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar’s visit to Tehran to attend Iranian President Raisi’s inauguration saw the Islamic Republic’s new leader praise India’s role in establishing security in Afghanistan, which might signal that those two are considering allying with Kabul against the Taliban to an as-yet undefined extent.

Indian-Iranian relations have seen their fair share of ups and downs over the past few years, especially after New Delhi loyally abided by its new Washington ally’s unilateral sanctions regime against Tehran, but their ties might soon improve judging by Iranian President Raisi’s latest remarks about the role that they can both play in establishing security in Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic’s new leader met with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar who traveled to the Tehran to attend his inauguration. According to the English-language version of the [official Twitter account](#) of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

“[President Raisi] stressed the importance of close cooperation and coordination between the two countries in developing peace and stability in the region, and said, ‘#Iran and India can play a constructive and useful role in ensuring security in the region, especially Afghanistan, and Tehran welcomes the New Delhi’s role in establishment of security in #Afghanistan. The fate of Afghanistan must be decided by the Afghans themselves, and we believe that if the Americans do not sabotage the situation, this issue will be resolved quickly.’”

It’s noteworthy that India and Iran are [voluntarily excluded](#) from the Extended Troika on Afghanistan consisting of Russia, Pakistan, China, and the US due to the former’s unwillingness to publicly talk to the Taliban (which Moscow requires as a precondition for participating) and the latter’s well-known ideological and political disagreements with the US. This places them in a similar strategic situation with respect to the Afghan peace process and thus sets the stage for them to work more closely together in advancing their shared interests in this conflict so long as Tehran has the political will to do so.

It’s [unlikely](#) that they’d be able to pull a page from the 1990s-era playbook by arming anti-

Taliban groups since that organization controls a significant share of Afghanistan's borders. Even so, President Raisi's praise of India's "constructive and useful role in ensuring security in the region, especially Afghanistan" hints that his principalist ("conservative") government might surprisingly allow Indian overflights through Iranian airspace in order to continue militarily supplying Kabul and its anti-Taliban allies despite Tehran previously hosting the Taliban as recently as last month for peace talks.

After all, that's the only relevant role that India is playing "in (the) establishment of security in Afghanistan." At the same time, however, President Raisi also predicted that "if the Americans do not sabotage the situation, this issue will be resolved quickly." What's so curious about his second remark is that it can also be interpreted as suggesting that Iran might not allow Indian overflights through its airspace for that purpose since the internationally recognized Afghan government is also officially an American ally. In other words, that exact scenario might arguably contribute to US efforts to "sabotage the situation" and thus prove counterproductive.

In other words, Iran is employing its stereotypical strategic ambiguity honed from millennia of diplomatic practice in order to confuse its target audience, which in this case consists of the US & India on one side and Russia & Pakistan on the other. The message intended for the first pair is that Iran is flexible with its foreign policy and wouldn't mind indirectly aiding their anti-Taliban efforts in exchange for a much-needed pressure valve from Washington's unilateral sanctions regime. In practice, this could take the form of the US lifting some of those restrictions in parallel with India investing more in the North-South Transport Corridor ([NSTC](#)).

As for second targeted pair of countries, Iran intends for them to receive this message as well so that they compete with the first pair in offering the Islamic Republic the most enticing incentives to abstain from that course of action. It shouldn't be forgotten that although Iran recently hosted the Taliban, Tehran still deeply distrusts the group after it murdered nearly a dozen of its diplomats in 1998 and is accused of abusing Afghanistan's majority-Shiite Hazara minority. Whereas the US and India can offer Iran economic incentives, Russia and Pakistan can perhaps counter with political and security ones connected to that conflict's outcome.

The stance of [Iran's new 25-year Chinese strategic partners](#) doesn't seem to have been factored into the country's deliberately ambiguous messaging regarding this scenario. The People's Republic is against any perpetuation of the Afghan Civil War, especially that which is externally driven such as what India and Iran might be contemplating with a wink from the US, but it's also unable to stop Tehran if it commits to doing this. China would prefer to most directly connect with Iran via the "[Persian Corridor](#)" through Tajikistan and Afghanistan, but this route could just be replaced with W-CPEC+ if made unviable in that scenario.

Of course, China could also informally dangle certain investment incentives to encourage Iran to move away from that scenario such as promising to accelerate the start of certain projects in exchange for ignoring India's presumably US-approved Afghan-directed security outreaches, but it's unclear whether that'll happen. For this reason, it's difficult at this moment to predict exactly what Iran's new government will do since there are pros and cons to each course of action. Ideally, Russia and Pakistan would ensure Iran's political and security interests in post-war Afghanistan, the US would lift the sanctions, and India would invest more in the NSTC.

That's unrealistic to expect, though, so Iran will likely have to commit to one of those two scenarios. It can either facilitate India's presumably US-approved "establishment of security in Afghanistan" by approving New Delhi's overflights through its airspace to militarily supply Kabul and its anti-Taliban allies, or it can ensure that this doesn't happen (or scale back and ultimately stop if it's already going on like some suspect). The second course of action is arguably the best for regional stability but Iran's economy is really struggling right now so its new principalist ("conservative") government might be tempted to seriously consider India's speculative plan.

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