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Nuclear Iran: India has made its choice

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India and Iran share a long friendship, owing to common security interests in Afghanistan and trade relations. This friendship is perceived to be a strategic relationship, wherein the countries are in negotiations for a multi-billion dollar gas [pipeline](#). However, in recent years, relations between the two countries has been [eroding](#) over delays in finalizing the pipeline agreement, the nuclear ambitions of Iran and the pro-Israeli/ American tilt of the Indian leadership.

The recently agreed US-India nuclear deal will provide India with previously restricted nuclear fuel and technology, giving India the benefits available to Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) members while still developing a nuclear weapon arsenal. Iran, a signatory to the NPT, is much [aggrieved](#) by what it sees as double standards. Similar assistance to that offered to India is offered to Iran under the unique condition of restrictions to its domestic fuel-cycle activities. Iran stands accused of violating its safeguards agreement with the IAEA and is suspected to have had a nuclear weapons program, for which they have been censured by both the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board and UN Security Council. [Revelations](#) that Iran was a beneficiary, in the now infamous A.Q. Khan network have undermined any support they might have enjoyed from China and Russia. Verbal [tirades](#) against Israel by the President and the Supreme Leader have further isolated Iran, and magnified fears of the consequences arising from its nuclear ambitions. In this environment, at the IAEA Board in 2005 India chose to [vote](#) in favor of reporting Iran to the Security Council for violations of its safeguards obligations.

The vote's timing, during early negotiations on the Indo-US deal, and the preceding statements from American officials, relegated genuine Indian concerns of a nuclear Iran to the background. In September 2007, Richard Boucher, assistant secretary of state for South Asia, [said](#) "The Indian government is very well aware of the concerns over India's military relationship with Iran. What we are trying to do is for everybody to understand the facts of the matter." [According](#) to the US Ambassador to India, if India had not supported the censure of Iran, the nuclear deal would have been in trouble.

This had raised the hackles of Indian officials, who did not wish to be seen as being bulldozed into voting in favor of the western nations. Seeking to allay fears of American bullying, the Indian defense minister A.K Anthony articulated “India has very friendly relations with Iran. It will continue to do so. India's friendship will not come in the way of good relations with any other country.”

A nuclear Iran is not in India’s security interests. In addition, India is seeking to project itself as an important world power and realizes the diplomatic implications of siding with an isolated state accused of violating its non-proliferation ideals. The Indian government has long championed non-proliferation despite its abstaining from the NPT, and would not wish to tarnish that record. In fact, the nature of the Iranian nuclear program and India’s friendship with Iran had resulted in a tough spot for Indian officials, who were hoping that a vote could be avoided.

A nuclear Iran opens up a frightening possibility of an arms race in the Middle East, especially with nations such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia already airing their apprehensions of growing Iranian influence in the region, and their own interest in nuclear power. Such instability would push oil prices significantly higher, and this would considerably hurt the Indian government which relies on oil imports and subsidizes fuel prices in the country.

Energy security concerns have been instrumental in pushing India to align with the United States to pursue nuclear energy. The Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline has been in negotiations for nearly a decade and is not economically feasible considering the security environment in Afghanistan and the Pakistan. In order to pursue nuclear energy, India had to translate its strong anti-proliferation words into action, and this was witnessed when it banned the export of any dual use technology to Iran.

There is little doubt that any other strategy towards Iran at the IAEA would also have complicated India’s dealings with Israel, its second largest defense supplier. To the dismay of the Iranian government, earlier this year India launched an Israeli spy satellite, ostensibly to monitor Iranian nuclear facilities. Significantly, a recent visit to India by the Iranian President was downplayed, with the Indian Prime Minister declining a joint press briefing. Israel embassy spokesperson Lior Weintraub, had spoken about India’s role in restricting a nuclear Iran, when he said “it is a global responsibility in denying the Iranians the capability to develop nuclear weapons”.

Addressing another aspect of a nuclear Iran, the Indian Ambassador to the United States articulated the need to strengthen the proliferation regime, when he said ‘a combination of terrorism and nuclear weapons would be a nightmare for India, and therefore India would oppose another nuclear weapons state in the region’.

Despite high level meetings continuing between the two countries, and even military cooperation, relations have been frosty. Iran’s exasperation over Indian concerns on the pipeline have led to speculations that India would lose out on the deal, and China would be the end benefactor. According to Iran's Energy & Economic Counsellor in India, Ainollah Souri, it was feasible, technically as well as economically for an Iran-Pakistan-China pipeline. US

Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick [warned](#) China of a risk to its relationship with the United States. The Indian Prime Minister's strong [statement](#) against a nuclear Iran, following a state visit to the United States, raises lingering questions of American pressure.

While India strongly opposes a military solution to the problem, it has its own independent interests in preventing Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon capability. Its continued relationship with Iran coupled with its new strategic partnership with the United States, places it in a crucial position with the leverage to help form a breakthrough in stalled negotiations. Indian foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee is preparing to visit Tehran in the near future.