

Iran's Diplomacy Aims At Eurasian Cooperation

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

One of the thorniest questions in international politics has been, how tensions between nuclear powers Pakistan and India can be relaxed, and an adversary relationship transformed into one of cooperation. Now, prospective progress on this front is emerging from what might seem an unexpected quarter: the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the recent state visit of Iranian President Mohammed Khatami to Islamabad, Pakistan on Dec. 23-25, hopes have been rising that Iran may prove to be a special kind of mediator—not a diplomatic mediator, regarding, for example, the issue of Kashmir, which has to be settled bilaterally—but a mediator of economic cooperation agreements which could lay the basis for durable peace.

Khatami made clear that he understands this perspective strategically, as an intervention to thwart attempts at regional destabilization. In a press conference in Islamabad on Dec. 24 with Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, he stated, "This is our region, and we must use all our available resources for the cause of development of the region. Some forces do not want to see development and progress in this region. . . . We will do everything for the cause of development. We will do everything possible to reduce tensions between the two countries."

At the banquet hosted by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, Khatami noted Iran's privileged position: "We have good relations with both countries, and can play an important role in defusing tension between the two. We have made efforts in the past to iron out the differences between the two neighbors." President Musharraf, in return, expressed his appreciation of "Iran's efforts to defuse tensions between Pakistan and India."

Pipeline for Peace

Khatami's concrete proposal is that a gas pipeline be built from Iran into India, via Pakistan. Iran and Pakistan agreed to a feasibility study for the \$4 billion project last year, and both India and Pakistan have signalled their eagerness to see it implemented. In India, there has been discussion as well of a direct pipeline, under water, between Iran and India, which would bypass Pakistan. Supporters of this option prefer it because of concerns about the security of the overland route. Khatami made clear, while in Pakistan, that he understood this: "There is no problem between Iran and Pakistan to undertake the gas pipeline project," he said, "but in this regard there is a need to remove some of the security concerns of India."

During the talks, Pakistani Foreign Minister Mian Khurshed Mehmood Kasuri told Iran's IRNA news agency on Dec. 23, "We are ready to guarantee the security of this pipeline, . . . because economic issues should not be mixed with political ones." More precisely, it is because economic interests on all sides would benefit, that the political issue could be improved. Speaking also to IRNA, General Musharraf gave his full support to the proposal, saying it would be beneficial especially for India, because "it is pushing for industrialization on a larger scale, and presently is importing liquefied gas." Musharraf said Pakistan would attend if a tripartite meeting on the project could be arranged, to help bring it from discussion to realization. He expressed his confidence in Iran's role as go-between: "I think it is only Iran that can convince [India] to push through with the gas pipeline."

The pipeline was not the only project on the table. In addition to plans for expanding trade, which Musharraf stressed as a priority, completion of new railway connections was also discussed. Accompanying Khatami were the Iranian ministers of defense, foreign affairs, and transportation. The last, Ahmad Khurram, announced on Dec. 24 that, with the completion of the Kermanshah-Zahedan rail link, Iran would be able to offer Pakistani pilgrims a safe and comfortable journey to Saudi Arabia's Islamic holy places. In addition, the completion of the link will provide access to Europe and Central Asia, he said. In fact, it is one of the crucial missing links in the continental Eurasian Land-Bridge.

Pakistan's Minister for Industries and Production, Liaquat Ali Khan Jatoi, characterized the Iranian visit as marking the beginning of a new era between it and Pakistan. Three agreements and a memorandum of understanding were signed, and the prospect of joint work toward infrastructure development in Afghanistan was also raised by Jatoi.

Relations between Pakistan and Iran, though reaching back far in time, had undergone a severe crisis while the Taliban regime in Afghanistan enjoyed Pakistan's support. Not only did Taliban forces systematically harass pro-Iranian Shi'ites, but the regime also was responsible for the execution of Iranian diplomats and journalists in the Summer of 1998. The flood of drugs from Afghanistan has continued to be a destabilizing factor in Iran.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban regime, relations between Islamabad and Tehran have improved, although the "Talibanization" of Pakistan which has followed, remains of great concern to Iran. This is also a major issue for India, a fact well known to the Iranians. When Khatami was asked in Pakistan to comment on brutalities against Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat, he answered by denouncing brutalities of *all* types *wherever* they occur. Khatami then said, "The major problem is sectarian violence and sectarian differences, and we have to free ourselves from this sinister phenomenon," obviously referring to the Taliban phenomenon, as well as the conflict between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims in Pakistan. He added, "We should try to build a world where people can live in peace." Khatami urged Muslim clerics to work in unity "to

help forge unity in the ranks of Muslim *Ummah*. . . . “Our enemy is united; so we also need to work in unity.”

Next Stop, India

Musharraf will not have to wait long, to see whether the hopes placed in Khatami’s diplomacy are well-founded, as the Iranian President is scheduled to make a state visit to India. The Indian government officially announced that Khatami would visit New Delhi and would be the guest of honor on Jan. 26, India’s Republic Day.

The visit is important, not only because of Pakistani-Indian relations, but, more broadly, because of Iran’s growing association with the “Strategic Triangle” of Russia, China, and India. Due to its vigorous foreign policy, since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, based on developing transportation infrastructure links through Central Asia and into China, Iran has established itself as the “second pillar,” after China, of the Eurasian Land-Bridge. Recently, with the agreements for a North-South transportation corridor, Iran has become a link between Russia and India. Thus, it is to be expected that during his visit to New Delhi, Khatami’s discussions will reflect a broader geographical and strategic context.

In India, too, the emphasis will be on economic cooperation as the basis for regional stability. It was no coincidence, that as the Indian government officially announced Khatami’s

visit, a first major contract was signed between the two countries for oil exploration. The deal, signed on Dec. 25, in Tehran, is for exploration in the Iranian oil field Fars Bloc. The contract, worth \$27 million, was clinched by a consortium including ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL), Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), and Oil India Ltd (OIL), which signed with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). In the Fars oil field, OVL and IOC will hold 40% each, while OIL will have 20%. It is expected that over 500 million barrels will be found.

The managing director of the Gas Authority of India Ltd (GAIL), Prasanto Banerjee, outlined the immense potential for further cooperation with Iran, telling IRNA on Jan. 1 that since Iran has the second largest gas reserves in the world, and India is one of the largest gas consumers in Asia, the possibilities are unlimited. He announced that GAIL, which controls the total distribution network of gas in India, was negotiating with a petrochemical marketing agency in Iran, to handle global marketing of its petrochemicals.

An Indian Foreign Ministry official said that the upcoming Iranian state visit would strengthen the two countries’ strategic relations, and mentioned the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline: “The security of the said pipeline, and our troubled relations with Islamabad, are the main obstacles in finalizing that project.” Another ministry official said India hopes to expand trade with Iran through Chabahar Port, and thence

Khatami Hails Role for Pakistan’s National Poet

Pakistan’s *Daily Times* editorialized on Dec. 28:

“Visiting Iranian president Seyed Muhammad Khatami has leaned on the legacy of Allama [Muhammad] Iqbal to express his ‘unorthodox’ views on Western civilization. He told an audience in Islamabad that ‘Western culture is a conveyor of spiritual, artistic and philosophical creations; we, therefore, cannot and must not deprive ourselves of it, simply because of our dislike of the oppressive political and economic measures taken by the Westerners against the non-Western world—a fact which the fair and judicious political and economic thinkers and politicians of the West candidly confirm. Nor, of course, can we reject or discard our own cultural and spiritual heritage in the name of facilitating our scientific and cultural development.’ President Khatami thought that the shallow-minded among us were those who neglected the intellectual tradition of the West and focused merely on Western politics; he was equally against those who embraced the superficialities of the West and rejected their own Islamic values.

“Allama Muhammad Iqbal was an Islamic genius whose writings readily lend themselves to the kind of

thoughts that President Khatami wanted to express. . . . After Ali Shariati, Khatami’s view is the first really frank admission of the greatness of Iqbal as a thinker of Islam’s modern age. He has wisely taken recourse to Iqbal’s dialogue with the West to push forward his own policy of establishing communication with those centers of learning in the West that disagree with policies of Western ‘discrimination’ against the Islamic world.”

After Khatami’s departure from Pakistan, a seminar dedicated to the work of Iqbal was held on Dec. 28 in Islamabad, under the auspices of Allama Open University and the Cultural Consulate of Iran, featuring speakers from Iran, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

One of Iqbal’s admirers, Prof. Annemarie Schimmel, in her book *Islam—An Introduction*, describes his thought in these terms: “The philosophy of the Ego, of the continuous unfolding of the individual’s creative powers, as preached by Iqbal, is not only the basis for his thoughts about the individual human being, but also for his political philosophy. The community too has to utilize and unfold all its inherent possibilities. Only by doing so can it be tolerant . . . for tolerance is the attitude of the strong who respect the other’s personality.”

But Iqbal—himself an Indian—also conceived of a separate state for India’s Muslims, which was realized as Pakistan after his 1938 death.—*David Cherry*

to Afghanistan.

Just as President Khatami was engaged in talks in Islamabad, Russian Atomic Energy Minister Alexander Rumyantsev was in Tehran, to work out the final details of his country's nuclear cooperation program with Iran. This immediately made headlines in the U.S. and British press, where the cry was: Russia is supplying "axis of evil" member Iran, with nuclear technology!

Russia and Nuclear Energy

Rumyantsev took the wind out of the sails of such war-mongering propaganda, telling a press conference at his ministry, on his return from Iran on Dec. 27, that the main purpose of the trip was to check the construction of the nuclear power plant in Bushehr. This plant, begun by the German firm Siemens, had been abandoned at the time of the 1979 Iranian revolution, and later reactivated with Russian assistance. It is to be fully operational by the end of 2003. Rumyantsev stressed that Russia considers Iran both an economic and a strategic partner. As for the scare stories about Iran's "atomic bomb," he said repeatedly that Iran was using nuclear technology for purely peaceful purposes, that it has no nuclear weapons programs and will not have them in the foreseeable future. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) continues to inspect Iran's facilities regularly, and has never found anything suspect. In 2001, Rumyantsev said, the IAEA made 60 checks of Iran's nuclear facilities, including Bushehr, and concluded that there were no military programs. A similar number of checks occurred in 2002. He confirmed that Russia and Iran are working on a long-term agreement, in areas including atomic energy; plans have mentioned up to six further nuclear plants over the next 12-15 years.

The first step is the completion of Bushehr. Some 1,200 people are working there, 40% of them Ukrainian and 60% Russian. Their numbers are expected to increase over 6-8 months, because of the need for extra manpower for the assembly of heavy equipment. "The first batch of fuel for the Bushehr nuclear plant produced by Russia is ready and packed. Russia is trying to make necessary preparations for its shipment," Rumyantsev was quoted by IRNA. Supplying the fuel is contingent on a signed agreement for the return of the spent fuel to Russia. This agreement, he explained, had been reached in principle, and President Khatami had said Iran favored the idea. Now the final text is being worked out by the respective ministries; he expected it to be signed in January.

All things considered, Iran's foreign policy effort to secure regional stability through mutually beneficial economic cooperation agreements, is eminently viable. If it can forge economic ties between Pakistan and India, establishing the basis for trust, while strengthening its economic and strategic relations to Russia, the entire region will benefit. Khatami should be taken at his word: "This is our region, and we must use all our available resources for the cause of development of the region."