



What India's Relationship with Iran Means for America

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Back in 1946, while an interim government cabinet member, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, advocated keeping India "away from the power politics of groups, aligned against one another." Later, the country's defense minister, Krishna Menon, used the term non-aligned movement in a 1953 speech before the United Nations. Nehru then used the term again in a 1954 speech in Sri Lanka. Ever since, successive Indian governments, irrespective of their political bent, have hewed to a formal non-aligned policy, even though recent years have seen a distinct warming of relations with the West against a backdrop of sharpening India-China competition.

Here, it's important not to forget India's long history of engagement with the USSR and then Russia. During the Cold War, India depended on the Soviet Union for most of its military equipment, as well as to serve as a hedge against the China-Pakistan relationship. Subsequently, after the fall of the USSR, India's relations with Russia followed much the same trajectory. In 1993, India and Russia signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, followed later by a formal Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement. More recently, in 2018, India and Russia signed a \$5 billion agreement for the Russian S-400 air defense system. And last year, Indian defense minister Rajnath Singh traveled to Moscow, where he was an honored official guest at Russia's World War II victory anniversary parade.

These connections have had practical consequences. A 2021 Stimson Center study notes that 86 percent of India's armed forces are equipped with Russian equipment. Moscow and Delhi, in other words, are deeply aligned militarily.

So, too, are India and Iran. Delhi's relationship with Tehran dates back to Soviet times when the Indian military was involved in providing critical supplies to the Soviets through Iran. Memories of that cooperation are memorialized in Patriot Park outside of Moscow. Today, India maintains enduring interests in Iran. India needs liquid natural gas to help support its rapid economic growth. There was an agreement for Tehran to supply India with LNG which was interrupted by U.S. sanctions in 2018, forcing India to diversify its energy imports, including buying LNG and oil from the United States and elsewhere. Now, signs of warming relations between Washington and Tehran could put Iranian LNG exports to India back on the table. Tehran, Moscow and New Delhi are also jointly cooperating in a North-South Transportation Corridor. And while a 2012 agreement by India to allow Iran access to its military technology is moribund, Iran still figures into India's security strategy.

All of this is relevant to the United States. Recent years have seen a growing—and bipartisan—strategic alignment between Washington and New Delhi. This trajectory is liable to continue under the Biden administration. Biden, after all, championed closer engagement with India when he served as vice president in the Obama administration, and before that during his tenure as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In that latter capacity, Biden played an important role in helping to lift U.S. sanctions on India in 2001 and threw his weight behind American support for India's nuclear energy efforts thereafter. Although still in formation, the Biden administration's Asia policy is likely to echo these priorities.

Security ties with India can be expected to improve further as well. In an effort to balance China, India is now working ever more closely with Japan, the United States, and Australia in the so-called "Quad" security alliance, and with Vietnam to improve stability in the Indo-Pacific region. These Indian efforts are liable to work in Washington's favor as the U.S. proceeds down the path of great-power competition with the People's Republic of China.

For all this potential, however, U.S. policymakers would be prudent to realize that there may be limitations to cooperation with India. New Delhi, after all, shows no signs of willingness to sever its ties to either Moscow or Tehran. Those bilateral relationships remain a priority for Indian policymakers. Indeed, no matter how warm relations between Washington and Delhi become, history shows that some level of non-alignment will always be part of India's policies. The Biden administration would do well to keep this in mind as it plots a new era of engagement with India.