

India Appears Sidelined as Pakistan Tries to Play Peacemaker

By ALEX TRAVELLI

NEW DELHI — Pakistan positioned itself as an intermediary between the United States and Iran this week. It conveyed a 15-point American plan to end the war to the leadership in Tehran, officials briefed on the diplomacy said, and it has offered to host peace talks.

For India, Pakistan's gigantic neighbor and archrival, the news adds to a troubling trend. It is watching warily as Pakistan continues to strengthen its ties with President Trump while its own relations with the United States have been rocky.

On the same day that the Pakistani gambit was reported, the United States' ambassador in New Delhi announced that a phone call had taken place between Mr. Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India.

Mr. Modi posted on social media afterward that both leaders "agreed to stay in touch regarding efforts towards peace and stability" in the Middle East and that opening the Strait of Hormuz, a major oil and gas shipping route off Iran's coast, was of paramount importance. The closure of the strait threatens India with economic devastation, as it does Pakistan and most of Asia.

"Normally," said Happymon Jacob, a professor of diplomacy at Shiv Nadar University near New Delhi, the intermediary role would be played by the United Nations or a country like Qatar.

But given that Mr. Trump is "generally negative and dismissive about the U.N.," and the fact that Iran is bombing Qatar, the need for another approach was obvious, he said.

Pakistan is a natural fit for the job. It has a big border with Iran, experience working with the U.S. military, and defense ties with Saudi Arabia and China. Since last summer, after a conflict with India that Mr. Trump claimed to have settled, Pakistani leaders have enjoyed a warm welcome in Washington.

Unlike India, Pakistan is enthusiastic about third-party mediations. India's position with regard to the war in Iran was made awkward by Mr. Modi's vaunted closeness with Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, who hosted him in Tel Aviv two days before Israel and the United States attacked Iran.

T.C.A. Raghavan, a former diplomat who led India's mission in Pakistan, acknowledged that there had been "a greater convergence in the U.S.-Pakistan

relationship in the past year and a half" and that if Pakistan provided a platform for fruitful talks with Iran, that relationship would grow stronger yet.

But Mr. Raghavan said India should avoid the "point of view that sees everything related to Pakistan as a zero-sum game." What is good for Pakistan, he argued, can be good for India.

If Mr. Modi needed reassurance from the United States, Elbridge Colby, the under secretary of defense for policy, was on hand. He spent Tuesday in New Delhi talking up the "firm and durable basis for our partnership."

Mr. Colby, whose trip was planned before the war began, emphasized the big picture, barely mentioning the war. Instead, he stressed how "India's role is indispensable" and makes

it a model partner for the United States. With prepared remarks at the Ananta Center, a foreign-policy think tank, he made the case for upgrading ties between India and the United States.

Mr. Colby hailed India as another "republic of continental scale," which is pursuing an India First course under Mr. Modi, similar to Mr. Trump's America First: "hardheaded," shorn of "gauzy aspirations and detached idealism," he said.

The flattery bypassed most of the jolts that shook the U.S.-India relationship over the past year. Those included Mr. Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs and further penalties he imposed over India's purchases of Russian oil. Mr. Trump has also called India a "dead economy" and cracked down on work visas for Indians.

He emphasized flexibility and "looking for areas of agreement where they count most," such as "an Indo-Pacific which no one power can dominate." That framing points a finger at China, which directly threatens both India's and the United States' interests.

Jairam Ramesh, a leader of India's opposition Congress Party, said Mr. Modi's government had been outmaneuvered by Pakistan's superior "diplomatic engagement and narrative management."

But Mr. Raghavan cautioned against keeping score. He described an Indian "school of thought that convinced itself that Pakistan had become irrelevant." But, he said, "It's the fifth-largest country in the world, it has nuclear weapons and it's in a critical geopolitical position."