

Jaishankar's Tehran trip holds key amid Afghan developments

His visit also signals easing of bilateral tensions

SUHASINI HAIDAR
NEW DELHI

The visit of External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar to Tehran to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on Thursday marks a milestone in recent attempts by both sides to reset the ties that have been under strain for several reasons, including India cancelling oil imports due to U.S. sanctions, progress in Chabahar and Iranian comments on Kashmir over the past few years.

They also signal that India will continue to balance its ties with Iran on one side, and Iran and the U.S., and West Asian adversaries, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, on the other.

"During his visit, EAM will

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call on the President, and on the sidelines, will also meet other leaders," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said in a statement ahead of the visit. Mr. Jaishankar's second one to Tehran within the space of a month. In early July, then newly-elected Mr. Raisi made a break from protocol to meet Mr. Jaishankar and invited the government to attend.

India has attended the swearing-in ceremonies of Iranian leaders before. Former Vice-President Hamid Ansari and then former Petroleum Minister Nitin Gadkari led the Indian participation both times former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was sworn in (2013 and 2017), but the timing of



New reign: Iran's new President Ebrahim Raisi gestures during his swearing-in ceremony in Tehran on Thursday. ■ AFP

Mr. Jaishankar's visit is of particular note.

To begin with, his visits come amidst rapid developments in Afghanistan, with the U.S. completing the pull-out of troops and the Taliban increasing its attacks on Afghan cities.

"The rapid advance of Taliban concerns both India and Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has called an [Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan] as a 'security threat for Iran and India and an existential threat for Pakistan'. Given

this context, and common interests, it is necessary for India and Iran to cooperate more closely, particularly on Afghanistan, and work to support the democratically-elected Ashraf Ghani-led government," former Indian Ambassador to Iran (2011-2015) D.P. Srivastava told *The Hindu*, referring to remarks made by Mr. Zarif during the Raisina Dialogue in April last.

With the U.S.-Russia-China-Pakistan grouping on Afghanistan deciding to meet again in Doha next Wednes-

day, India and Iran also share a common bond as the two regional powers were left out of the "Troika plus".

Secondly, the fact that Mr. Jaishankar is himself participating in the ceremony, without delegating it to another Minister, puts a spotlight on India's desire to build ties with Mr. Raisi in particular, who as the Chief Judge of Iran prior to this was placed on the U.S.'s list of individuals sanctioned in November 2019.

Despite campaign promises to reverse the Donald Trump policy on Iran, U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has yet to withdraw most of the additional sanctions placed in 2017-2018.

Walk a tightrope

That Mr. Jaishankar's travels to Tehran book-ended a visit to Delhi by U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken indicates that India will continue to walk its tightrope between its traditional ties with Iran and the growing strategic partnership with Washington.

"The presence of Mr. Jaishankar at the swearing-in is itself a pointer to the view held by India at the highest level. We have common interests in the region, which cannot be a subset of other relations, even though those relations are important too," said Mr. Srivastava, when asked if India's ties with the U.S. and Israel would in any way be affected by the visit.

Finally, the flurry of meetings to Tehran and Mr. Zarif's engagement with Delhi indicate a desire to move on from some of the tensions in ties during the Rouhani era.