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Iran and Afghanistan: The Urgent Need for Inclusive Regional Diplomacy

Sumitha Narayanan Kutty

Iran wants a stable Afghanistan and has meticulously worked to protect its interests before and after 2001 to this end. Prior to 2001, Iran was the primary backer of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, and after September 2011 it was one of the earliest supporters of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan to rout the Taliban. Since then, the country has established considerable political and economic presence in its eastern neighbor—both overt and covert—through generous cash payments to the Afghan government and essential development aid delivered through religious and charitable organizations. Tehran also seeks long-term political stability in Afghanistan, though it is no stickler for liberal democracy. In the short term, Iran appears to be fairly satisfied with the status quo as long as Afghanistan is not used as a base for attacks against it.

Tehran would like its vision for a stable Afghanistan to be realized within a context of zero U.S. troops on the ground after 2014. Consequently, it is keeping a very close eye on developments in the country, specifically the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This essay examines Iran's enduring interests in Afghanistan and their implications for relations with the United States and other regional players beyond 2014.

Iran's Interests in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has always been strategically significant to Iran. The landlocked country shares a 582-mile border with Iran to its west, and the two neighbors have no unsettled territorial disputes, which is a rarity in the region. They also share linguistic, cultural, and religious links—one-fifth of Afghanistan's population is Shia—owing to their common history under consecutive Persian empires.

Iran has four long-standing strategic objectives vis-à-vis Afghanistan. First, Tehran wants an administration in Kabul that will not only distance itself from the United States but also remain wary of the Taliban and its state sponsors, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Such being the case today, Iran

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will continue its policy of supporting the Afghan presidency. It will not object to the 2014 elections producing a Pashtun majority as long as ethnic minorities, such as the Tajiks and Hazaras, obtain fair representation in the new government. Iran has previously demonstrated such tolerance in the Bonn conference of 2001 and in the 2004 and 2009 elections. This willingness ties into Iran's second non-negotiable interest: leveraging the Shiite Dari/Persian-speaking non-Pashtun population. The country has protected the interests of its traditional Afghan allies—the Farsiwan Heratis, the Shia Hazara, and Tajiks—and cultivated relations with as many factions as possible, including those supporting the incumbent president Hamid Karzai. Iran has also built and maintained close ties with key players in the Afghan political landscape, including Abdullah Abdullah, presidential candidate and leading opposition figure; Ismail Khan, vice presidential candidate and former governor of Herat; and Mohammad Yunus Qanooni, the lower house speaker and political and military heir of Ahmad Shah Massoud. This political clout will help Tehran advance its goals in Afghanistan after 2014. In addition, Iran has preserved relationships with the militias it helped train during the Soviet invasion.

Iran's third priority is safeguarding on-the-ground investments and personnel, particularly in western Afghanistan. The killings of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998 serve as a stark reminder of the threats that Iranians engaged in commerce can face from a resurgent Taliban. Such personnel are at the forefront of Iran's strategic vision of playing a powerful role in Afghanistan beyond the political and security realms. Preserving an economic sphere of influence in Afghanistan is Iran's fourth strategic objective. The country pledged a total of \$900 million in aid for reconstruction projects during 2002–13, with about \$500 million disbursed at the time of writing.¹ Iran accounts for roughly 35%–40% of exports to Afghanistan, and annual bilateral trade stands at around \$2 billion.² In terms of private investment, an estimated two thousand private Iranian firms operate in Afghanistan.³

¹ See Lydia Poole, "Afghanistan: Tracking Major Resource Flows 2002–2010," Global Humanitarian Assistance, Briefing Paper, January 2011, 4 ~ <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/gha-Afghanistan-2011-major-resource-flows.pdf>; and Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL30588, October 23, 2013, 51 ~ <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.

² F. Milad, "Official: Tehran-Kabul Trade to Hit \$3 Billion," Trend News Agency, September 8, 2012 ~ <http://en.trend.az/regions/iran/2063182.html>.

³ Hazifullah Gardesh, "Afghans Fear Fallout from Iran Sanctions," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Afghan Recovery Report, October 3, 2006 ~ <http://iwpr.net/report-news/afghans-fear-fallout-iran-sanctions>.

Iran has worked to expand and consolidate its economic presence, particularly in the western province of Herat. The bulk of Iranian investment since 2001 lies in this region and is spread across infrastructure projects such as road and bridge construction, telecommunication projects, education, and agriculture. Iran is also a major player in Afghanistan's energy sector: it provides about 50% of the country's oil imports and has invested in power-generation projects.⁴ A vocal proponent of regional integration, Iran has touted the guaranteed land and sea access it offers landlocked Afghanistan as essential to the country's trade prospects. For its part, Afghanistan has shown a willingness to negotiate an agreement that would increase trade with Iran, as well as with India, Central Asia, and Europe, via the Iranian port of Chabahar, which is being financed by India. Among other development projects, Iran is working to improve the "golden transit route," a 125-kilometer road running from Iran's Dougharoun region to Herat, at a cost of \$43 million; is building a 176-kilometer railroad to Herat; and has announced plans to invest \$75 million in the construction of the Afghan part of the Khaf-Herat railway that aims to connect Afghanistan to eastern Iran.

Apart from the above strategic objectives, Iran has three short-term, flexible goals in Afghanistan. The first is cross-border stability. Tehran expects Kabul's cooperation in fighting the Baluchi separatist group Jundullah and its network. Iran would also like to see a reduction in the flow of narcotics into and through its territory. The country has lost hundreds of members of its security forces in clashes with traffickers, though the government is always careful to not blame Karzai directly. A second short-term goal is the repatriation of the 2.4 million Afghan refugees in Iran, of which only 1 million are there legally. The Iranian government under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad often threatened to expel them if Kabul signed a strategic security agreement with the United States. This unresolved situation has constantly strained bilateral relations with Afghanistan, and sanctions have only further exacerbated discrimination against Afghan refugees. Iran's third short-term goal is related to an old bilateral dispute involving the Helmand River. The river serves as both the main source of water for Hamoun Lake in Iran's southeastern Sistan and Baluchestan Province and an economic resource for the region. Iran would like to see Afghanistan abandon its policy of using the river as a political tool.

⁴ Viola Gienger, "Afghanistan Needs Leeway on Iran Sanctions, Minister Says," Bloomberg News, April 3, 2012. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-04-03/afghanistan-needs-leeway-on-iran-sanctions-minister-says.html>.

With an eye toward balancing U.S. military influence after 2014, the two governments inked a strategic cooperation agreement in August 2013. The cooperation extends to military training, counterterrorism, organized crime, joint military exercises (including counternarcotics), and intelligence-sharing on “developments in the field of threats for national security...including in Central, West and South Asia.”⁵ Iran’s alliance of convenience in the past with certain elements of the Taliban was primarily intended to undermine U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Moreover, the volume of arms and money that Iran supplied was trivial compared with that provided by Pakistan. Given the impending withdrawal or reduction in foreign troops, the possibility of extending cooperation with Afghanistan after 2014 potentially outweighs any benefits for Iran of a dangerous dalliance with the Taliban.

A policy of continuity should be expected with regard to the above interests in the near term. Factors in Afghanistan that could alter Iran’s calculations are the conduct and outcome of the 2014 presidential elections, the ideological leanings of the new president, an escalation of the Taliban insurgency, and further undesirable impacts for Afghanistan of the sanctions on Iran. Iran’s involvement in Afghanistan also depends on extraneous factors such as its rivalry with the Persian Gulf states and increasingly its nuclear agreement with the P5+1, which has a direct impact on Iran-U.S. relations and the two sides’ interaction vis-a-vis Afghanistan.⁶

Iran-U.S. Relations and Afghanistan

For all the animosity that defines Iran-U.S. relations, the two countries have shared interests in Afghanistan. Unlike Pakistan, Iran and the United States both find the current Afghan political dispensation quite acceptable and aim to support the upcoming presidential elections. They also recognize the need to engage the Taliban, though each has done so on its own, separate terms. Both Iran and the United States thus value stability in Afghanistan; where they differ is on the issue of whether a U.S. presence, however small, is needed to realize this stability. Iran views U.S. troops in its backyard as a threat, and in 2007 this insecurity prompted Tehran to change its

⁵ Thomas Ruttig, “Can Kabul Carry Two Melons in One Hand? Afghanistan and Iran Sign Strategic Cooperation Document,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, August 6, 2013 ~ <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/can-kabul-carry-two-melons-in-one-hand-afghanistan-and-iran-sign-strategic-cooperation-document>.

⁶ The P5+1 comprises the permanent five members of the UN Security Council (the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France) plus Germany.

policy of restraint to one of retaliation in Afghanistan if the United States attacked Iran. Iran believes that residual foreign troops after 2014 will be a destabilizing factor because their presence is a major cause for the continuing insurgency in Afghanistan. Tehran has traditionally opposed a bilateral security agreement (BSA) between Washington and Kabul. The version of the document endorsed by the *loya jirga* (an assembly of Afghan tribal elders) in November 2013, though stonewalled by President Karzai at the time of writing, favored a U.S. troop presence after 2014. This raised concerns in Tehran despite Washington's pledge in the BSA to "not use Afghan territory as a launching point for attacks against other countries."⁷

Signs of a thaw in Iran-U.S. relations would only prove beneficial to Afghanistan's future stability. The historic nuclear deal struck in November 2013 between Iran and the P5+1 has created a critical window of opportunity that must be seized. These negotiations included direct engagement between Iranian and U.S. diplomats—the first of its kind in roughly 30 years. Furthermore, the Rouhani administration has voiced its preference to create political space for dialogue on Afghanistan if significant progress is made on the nuclear issue. It would be unwise to deny one of Afghanistan's largest and most influential neighbors a seat at the table, given Iran's past tendency to be disruptive and thus possibly undermine U.S. goals in the country.

Iran's Relations with Key Regional Players

Iran has repeatedly called for a regional solution to instability in Afghanistan. In recent years, rising tensions with the West have prompted Tehran to increase political coordination with regional states and in particular India. Iran clearly views India as a worthwhile partner in Afghanistan, and they have discussed cooperation on terrorism and drug trafficking since 2003. India views Iran as its gateway to Central Asia and has signed a trilateral agreement with Iran and Afghanistan on trade and transit cooperation. Both countries have also been greatly active in socioeconomic development in Afghanistan, particularly in developing transport and power infrastructure. The relationship has, however, been characterized more by talk and less by action. The countries disagree over the presence of foreign troops: India wants ISAF to remain involved in the region, whereas Iran clearly does not. Other factors that will continue to

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Afghanistan), "Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan," November 20, 2013 ~ <http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/bsa>.

constrain Indo-Iranian cooperation include New Delhi's unwillingness to engage further in Afghanistan given the deteriorating security environment, its proclivity toward the United States, the sanctions that hamper doing business with Iran, and the emergence of the Persian Gulf states and Israel as viable strategic alternatives for India.

Pakistan, by contrast, has a testy relationship with Iran. Islamabad has long preferred an Islamist Sunni regime in Kabul that would pander to its strategic interests. This vision conflicts with Tehran's push for a political settlement that is inclusive of non-Pashtun minorities and could destabilize Sunni areas on Iran's border with Afghanistan if it were to come to fruition. Tehran's friendly ties with New Delhi are yet another sore point with Islamabad. A rise in attacks against Iranian border guards by Pakistani Sunni groups has further strained ties, even as Iran keeps a close eye on rising Shia-Sunni sectarian violence across the border in Pakistan.

Iran and China share common concerns about the situation in Afghanistan. In particular, they believe that Kabul should be less dependent on Washington, with both Iran and China endorsing the need for a regional solution. Economic cooperation remains the cornerstone of Beijing's Afghan policy. China has made key investments in Afghanistan's mining sector and worked to develop transit infrastructure with the goal of linking China and Iran by rail via Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Iran approves of all these development projects. China, however, primarily views its relationship with Afghanistan through the prism of its ally Pakistan and, when push comes to shove, could choose supporting the latter's interests over those of Iran.

Given its controversial past in Afghanistan, Russia has kept a safe distance from the reconstruction efforts and resisted any form of direct military engagement. Though not thrilled by the possibility of a long-term U.S. presence in Central Asia, Moscow has constantly promoted the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a key regional partner, an idea that has received much pushback from NATO. Iran plays a critical role in Russia's vision for the region and is an important partner in the energy sector. Russia views Iran as a stabilizing factor in western Afghanistan and an ally in the fight against drug trafficking. It also favors an Afghan peace process based on power-sharing and political reconciliation.

The Central Asian states and Saudi Arabia are other critical players in Afghanistan's future. The five Central Asian states are particularly fearful of the rise of Islamist militancy as a result of ISAF's withdrawal. Many of them have forged closer ties with Iran to promote regional integration in

the form of joint hydroelectric projects and transportation infrastructure across Afghanistan. With regard to Saudi Arabia, sharp bilateral differences—ranging from the Syrian crisis to developments in Bahrain and Palestine—have only further strained ties between Riyadh and Tehran in the last year. Saudi Arabia has engaged and advanced its religious agenda in Afghanistan primarily through Pakistan and, in the past, the Taliban. In the event that a political vacuum arises in Kabul after 2014, the prospect of Saudi-Iranian rivalry playing out in Afghanistan cannot be dismissed.

The Case for Inclusive Regional Diplomacy

Iran has a lot at stake in Afghanistan's future. The interests explored in this essay—both long- and short-term—are here to stay, and a policy of continuity, expansion, and preservation of these goals should be expected beyond 2014. In contrast with Islamabad, Tehran exercises influence in Afghanistan today that perhaps even surpasses its own ambitions in the region.

However stark a picture one may paint of Afghanistan's future, it is important to acknowledge that there is broader consensus and cooperation among the Afghan political elite now than has ever been seen before. To effectively leverage this consensus, the United States must adopt an inclusive diplomatic strategy. The discontinuation of selective engagement and the inclusion of a critical stakeholder such as Iran can only prove beneficial to Afghanistan's future after ISAF's withdrawal. ♦