

US-Iran Relations and Peace in Afghanistan

MONISH GULATI

General

Iran and Afghanistan share a 936-km border which runs through several deserts and marshlands and flanks the Afghan provinces of Herat, Farah, and Nimruz. The two countries also share several religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups that create a cultural overlap between the two neighbours. Iran has a population of 66.4 million and it is one of the world's few Shia-majority states, with the Shia Muslims comprising 89 percent of the population or 58.6 million of people. On the other hand, Afghanistan is predominately Sunni Muslim (80 percent, roughly 27 million people), it however does have a sizeable Shia minority, which accounts for nineteen percent of the population or roughly 6.2 million people. The Hazaras which make up roughly nine percent of Afghanistan's population or 2.9 million people are the major Shia group in the country. They are a Persian-speaking ethnic group which is concentrated mainly in central Afghanistan. Sizeable Hazara communities are present in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan.

Over last thirty years Iran has seen a revolution in February 1979 and has been the focus of US power play in Persian Gulf. Its neighbour in the East, Afghanistan has had its history shaped by invasions by the two super powers; the USSR (Russia) in December 1979 and the US in 2001. The Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran coincided with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The Russian occupation lasted nine years while the US has been in Afghanistan for the last thirteen years and counting. Afghanistan has had a period of communist

government (1978-92), civil war (1992-96) and few years under the Islamist Taliban. Consequently Iran-Afghanistan relations have borne the imprint of these tumultuous events, latest being that of the presence of the US led NATO/ISAF in Afghanistan. As per current indications US and NATO/ISAF will 'drawdown' from Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

Geopolitically, economically and for that matter by any other metric, Iran is a key player and a stakeholder in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. The presence of the US-led NATO/ISAF forces including current imbroglio over Iran's nuclear programme have constrained Iran's contribution to the country and the 'baggage' of US-Iran relations have understated and disregard the potential of Iranian assistance towards rebuilding of Afghanistan. In the process not only have the Iranian interests in Afghanistan been ignored, it has been excluded from most consultations and negotiations on the future of Afghanistan. Iran to its credit has persisted with bilateral and a few multilateral forums to safeguard its strategic interests in Afghanistan and kept itself relevant to the discourse.

This paper looks at the US interests in Afghanistan, its policy towards Iran, the influence of this policy on nature of Iran's involvement in Afghanistan and in turn impact of Iran's engagement in Afghanistan on the US efforts in stabilising Afghanistan. It is argued that US policy on Iran which has its basis in geopolitical and strategic considerations, other than US interest in Afghanistan, has led Iran to hedge its position against US involvement in AfPak. This Iranian posture has not only restricted US options in Afghanistan over the decade but has also limited the effectiveness of US efforts in stabilising Afghanistan, securing its interests and executing an 'honourable' drawdown from the country.

US Policy on Iran

Afghanistan stands out as an area where the animus originating in the 1953 CIA-led coup in Iran and the Iranian revolution of 1979, have overshadowed (and does so even today) the long-term common interests of the U.S. and Iran. There also exists a very credible narrative on the issue which points to the "Saudi factor", Israeli interests and Arab sentiments in determining certain contents of the US

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policy on Iran. The constructs of this policy have been maintained only to the detriment of the US, Iran, and Afghanistan interests and cooperation, which is borne by the fact that US considers Pakistan's actual nuclear weapons and proliferation activity less threatening than Iran's potential ones. The US also continues to emphasise Iran's support to the Taliban, while remaining publicly silent over Pakistan's far larger support to the same group. This deeply entrenched animosity between Iran and the US has served the interests of the Pakistan military, Taliban, and al-Qaida.

A major cross-over point in the US policy for the region came in 1998 when al-Qaida attacked US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, after which doing 'business' with the Taliban was put off the US agenda. However US persisted with its policy objective of sidelining Iran under the dual containment policy of the Clinton administration maintained against Baghdad and Tehran. Next major event was the 9/11 attack on the US and its decision to retaliate in Afghanistan, during the course of which Iran not only cooperated with the US, but actively helped it establishing support bases in Central Asia. US-Iranian cooperation occurred both in the field, in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and in diplomacy(Rubin:2008).The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarded these events as an opportunity to increase cooperation with the US in Afghanistan to include a wider set of issues. It was reported that Iranian officials at some stage even offered to work under US command to assist in building the Afghan National Army.

The Bush administration, however, rejected the initiative and instead, charged Iran with "harboring" Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who had sought refuge in Tehran after having been abandoned by Pakistan for the Taliban in 1995. In response Iran expelled him. US officials also charged Iran (astonishingly) with establishing influence in Herat and alleged that some members of al-Qaida had taken refuge in Iran. These charges came despite the overwhelming fact that the surviving core leadership of al-Qaida sought refuge in Pakistan where they remain even today (Rubin: 2008). Thus the Bush administration even after the events of 9/11 saw Afghanistan as a secondary diversion from its broader strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and Middle East including containment of Iran.

These events of the past decades have heightened Iran's thinking and fears about US engagement in the region and it currently views its interests in Afghanistan through the prism of US-Iranian enmity. Iran now believes that its direct and indirect cooperation with the U.S. in Afghanistan especially during the period of US intervention to remove Taliban and immediately after, did not decrease the tension in their relationship since the U.S. had a separate agenda. It has even been suggested that, possibly, the ultimate strategic objective of the US intervention in Afghanistan, was containment of Iran.

Iranian officials and independent experts characterise Iran's strategic concerns about a long-term US role in Afghanistan as an "existential threat" to the Islamic Republic, and that, US may use Afghanistan as a base to attack Iran and effect a regime change. The issue of 'regime change' has been a significant factor in the US-Iran relations. Analysts believe that as long as the U.S. position lacks clarity about its support on overthrowing or subverting the Islamic Republic by the use of force, Tehran is not likely to place its common interests with the U.S. in Afghanistan over its strategic opposition.

Many regional experts argue that Tehran does not believe that a stable Afghanistan with a large, long-term U.S. troop presence is in its interests. Tehran worries that if Afghanistan is stabilised, Iran will have pro-US government on its flank. There is also a view that Iran despite the existing differences with the US, can still have good relations with Afghanistan as this could result in reducing Chinese influence in south and central Asia and also decrease Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan. However, Iran's main objective is to increase its own security and overcome the threat of military action. Iran believes that the US, despite its opposition to Iran's nuclear program, will not compromise Afghan interests.

Iran's Position on US in Afghanistan

In May 2005 the Afghan government asked the US to sign a Declaration for Strategic Partnership, which was signed by Presidents Karzai and Bush in Washington. Iran responded by asking President Karzai for a similar agreement which among its provisions would commit Afghanistan not to permit its territory to be used for military or intelligence operations against Iran. The message from Iran was that it would accept Afghanistan's strategic partnership with the United States, but only if it is not directed against Iran. (Rubin: 2008). President Karzai is reported to have conveyed that he would like to sign such a declaration, but that his government was not in a position to prevent the US from using its territory

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against Iran. A few months later, in January 2006, US again reportedly pressurised Karzai from travelling to Tehran to sign economic agreements between the two countries (Rubin: 2008).

In the summer of 2007, there were calls in the US for regime change and a pre-emptive attack on Iran's nuclear programme causing Tehran to formally change its policy toward the US in Afghanistan. The previous Iranian position was that even if the US attacked Iran, it would not respond in Afghanistan as Iran's bilateral interest in stability in Afghanistan and in supporting the Karzai government as a safeguard against the Taliban and al-Qaida outweighed any advantage that would result from attacking the U.S. presence.

Now, if Iran were attacked by the U.S. its troops in Afghanistan would be vulnerable to Iranian retaliation (Rubin: 2008).

US-Iran: Common interests

Both, US and Iran, have a stake in a stable Afghanistan that is not under Taliban control. The US and Iranian interests converge over basic governance issues such as improving border controls, controlling the flow of drugs and other contraband, provision of basic amenities in the cities and in vulnerable provinces, and training provincial level law enforcement forces. The two countries may also agree and tacitly cooperate with Afghanistan in reintegrating moderate Taliban affiliates into the national security forces, and on strengthening the central government's institutional capacities and its ability to represent the country's diverse political and ethnic groups through democratic free and fair elections. They would also like to see Afghanistan emerge from decades of conflict into a more reliable trading partner, transit route, and competent state that can prevent non-Afghan non-state actors from operating on its territory.

Iran according to its stated policy participates in the multilateral meetings organised by the US and Afghanistan, and has endorsed the broad guidelines developed at the recent meetings in Istanbul (November 2011) and Bonn (December 2011) for the future of Afghanistan. It however, refrains from engaging the US bilaterally or independently of multilateral events (Laipton:

2012). Iran emphasises the regional approach as an appropriate alternative to an international approach currently being adopted.

Factors Influencing Iran's Afghan Policy

The main driver of Iran's Afghan policy is the notion that the more stability and development in Afghanistan, the more secure will be Iran's interests and the confidence that Iran can and must secure its interests in Afghanistan despite foreign competition. Its priorities are principally in the areas where its interests are prominent; West Afghanistan where the demographic ties are strongest (Laipson: 2012). Iranian policy therefore takes the approach that Iran is the guardian of Afghanistan's Farsi speakers—Tajiks and Hazaras—and its Shias. As a natural outcome it needs to prevent Pushtun dominance of Afghan national politics which in turn positions it to follow a course counter to the Pakistani interests and at times pursue options that weaken writ of the government in Kabul. However it is important to note that the Iranian sentiment of guardianship does not resound equally with the constituency whose interests it seeks to safeguard.

- **Pakistan Factor**

Iran has always avoided entering into open conflict with Pakistan, in particular due to the need to secure Islamabad's cooperation on the Baluchistan issue. Yet, objectively, the competition and the rivalry are there, and it is quite likely that it will become more explicit in the phase following the departure of US/NATO forces. Not only does Iran oppose Pakistani hegemony which would lead to its own exclusion from Afghanistan, but it is also wants to keep Taliban power in check to counter traditional Pakistani support of Pashtun radicalism.

- **US invasion of Iraq**

The US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath may have led to a new Iranian perspective of the US 'expeditionary' action in the region. On one hand, the US quickly deposed Saddam, the only enemy the Islamic Republic actually fought a conventional war with and who had occupied part of its territory. On the other hand, the US failure in nation building and stabilising Iraq after the defeat of Saddam exposed gaps in US approach and its lack of understanding of local challenges and dealing with them. In the aftermath of the US intervention in Iraq, Iran through covert support could establish a Shia dominated government relegating years of Sunni authority. This ensured that there would be no new territorial threat against Iran from that

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country, and enhanced Iran's position in the region (Parsi: 2013). The Afghan story could also unfold in a similar manner leaving Iran stronger and secure.

- **Nuclear Ambitions**

The mounting tensions over Iran's nuclear activities and increasingly harsh sanctions related to those activities, particularly economic sanctions, have made it difficult for Tehran to agree on engaging directly on ideas for short-term cooperation with US and EU for two reasons; one, apprehension that any cooperation could be misconstrued as an Iranian concession (Laipson: 2012). Two, the crippling effect of the sanctions on the everyday life of the citizens makes any rapprochement politically difficult. At the same

time sanctions have driven Iran to view Afghanistan as a means to break international isolation and generate commerce.

Iran's Afghan Policy

Wary of a Sunni-fundamentalist Pashtun state on its eastern border, Iran viewed the rise of the Taliban in 1994 and their seizure of Kabul in 1996 as a serious security, ideological, and economic threat. After the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Iran had broadened its contacts in Afghanistan from Shia groups to non-Pashtun groups. Tehran also supported groups such as the Shiite Hazara parties and the influential Tajik commander Ismail Khan in Herat province. However like Pakistan, they did not get much success in their attempts to create stable coalitions capable of governing the country.

As Taliban gained ground in Afghanistan, Iran moved beyond its ideological support for Shia parties to a strategic policy of supporting all anti-Taliban forces. This led to its support to the formation of an anti-Taliban coalition composed of mostly Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara factions—including Hezb-e Wahdat. This United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, also known as the Northern Alliance, was led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. Iran also settled its differences over Tajikistan with Russia, and the two states brokered the 1997 peace agreement in order to assure a consolidated backing for the Northern Alliance. Iran, along with Russia, provided arms and

funds to the Northern Alliance throughout the civil war, while Pakistan and Saudi Arabia supported the Taliban.

The Taliban, for its part, had backed Sunni Islamist militants who were launching attacks against the Iranian regime. In 1998, Taliban forces captured Mazar-e Sharif and massacred thousands of Hazara civilians, in addition to nine Iranians with diplomatic credentials. Incensed at the killing of its diplomats and the Taliban's horrific treatment of Shia minorities, Iran with the intent to retaliate positioned a quarter of a million troops along the Afghan border. However, a military confrontation between Iran and the Taliban was averted, but when the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to overthrow the Taliban, Iranian support was available (ISW: 2013).

In the aftermath of the Taliban's ouster Iran subsequently pursued a complex policy towards Afghanistan. It has sought greater influence over the government in Kabul, and remained wary of the U.S. and NATO presence in the country. Iran has a multilayered approach towards Afghanistan that addresses the needs of the Afghan people and reminds the international community, particularly the US, of Iran's relevance to international goals in the region (ISW: 2013).

Support to the Taliban

The US policy to isolate Iran from its affairs in Afghanistan and the Iranian requirement to hedge their position seems to have prompted Iran to assist the Taliban in a limited way. There were claims that the Quds Force of the IRGC was supplying some IEDs and other supplies to groups fighting in Western Afghanistan. The amount supplied was sufficient to act as a warning or signal, but was not enough to change the military balance significantly as the intention was only to make US insecure in Afghanistan (Rubin:2008). There are recent reports that Iran has permitted Taliban to open an office in the border city of Zahedan. However the US position to charge Iran with providing support to the Taliban, while remaining publicly silent over Pakistan's far larger support to the Taliban did not help the situation.

Defence Cooperation

The presence of US/NATO troops in Afghanistan leaves little room for defence cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan. However, after Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi had declared Iran's willingness to offer military/ training assistance for Afghan security forces, a joint defense commission of Iran and Afghanistan was formed. In December 2011 following the defense

commission meeting in Tehran a memorandum of defense agreement between Afghanistan and Iran was signed. The agreement has seen little traction but has symbolic value.

Reconstruction and Development Aid

According to analysts Iranian involvement is not limited to unofficial cooperation with militant forces, but in fact includes official efforts to influence the Afghan administration. (Tahir: 2007). Tehran has sought to exert influence over Afghan affairs through economic assistance. Iran pledged USD 560 million at the Tokyo Conference on the Reconstruction of Afghanistan in 2002, and an additional USD 100 million at the 2006 London Conference. Much of the Iranian aid to Afghanistan has been very rightly spent on infrastructure creation; mainly transportation links between Iran, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian Republics, which also served the national interest of Iran. A 123 km road linking Herat in western Afghanistan to the Dogharoun region in Iran has already been completed and work is underway to link Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman.

There is also a multi-billion-dollar project to connect Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan via rail, and construction of the first leg from the Iranian border to Herat is already underway. Such transportation links with Iran provide the landlocked and isolated Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics with an outlet to the world economy, increasing commerce in addition to Iranian influence. However, Iranian aid to Afghanistan has not been limited to transportation infrastructure and has included support for a variety of projects, such as the construction of a dental college and a water research facility.

Trade

Commerce between the two countries—minus petroleum—amounts to over a billion dollars a year. Afghanistan represents a significant untapped export market for Iranian products. Of late there have been reports that due to sanctions on the nuclear issue Iran has been trying to push in more goods into Afghanistan. Bilaterally Iran has sought to foster closer economic ties with its eastern neighbor ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Iran has attempted to integrate Afghanistan in regional/ multilateral trade arrangements including transport compacts. In 2008, Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan agreed to form the Economic Council of the Persian-Speaking Union. Also remittances from Afghan laborers in Iran amount to a considerable, 6 per cent (around \$500 million) of the Afghan GDP (ISW: 2013).

Transit Trade

Afghanistan is becoming increasingly dependent on Iran for its transit trade through the ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas as a result of the tense Afghan-Pakistan relationship. Afghanistan receives key imports such as electronic equipment, cars and spare parts besides food, clothing and other essential products are also supplied through Iran. Some regional experts argue that Iran is using the political tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan in its favour, leveraging the fact that Iran is the only route by which Afghanistan can maintain foreign trade (Tahir :2007). This reality limits Washington's options to pressure Tehran since if Iran blocks its border, the Afghan economy could collapse.

Education

This is another area where Iran has exerted tremendous influence in Afghanistan particularly in the western region. It has earned Iran the goodwill of the Afghan people. A library set up with Iranian grant at the Kabul University is reported to be very popular.

Impact of US-Iran Relations

Besides the more obvious effect the tepid US-Iran relations had on the induction and logistics support at the commencement and sustenance of 'Operation Enduring Freedom' from 2001, poor relations resulted in:

- Iran adopting a posture to counter US/NATO interests in Afghanistan resulting in political and material support to the Taliban.
- Loss of US leverage on Pakistan and the option to pressurise it to exert more positive influence on the Taliban towards reconciliation in Afghanistan.
- Lack of Iranian influence and cooperation in cobbling up a non-Pashtun alliance to present unified and credible political opposition to both the Taliban in their safe havens in Pakistan and to Hamid Karzai in Kabul.
- Inability to build on Iran's good relations with the Central Asian republics to set up transnational transportation links which would not only help in economic reconstruction of Afghanistan but would lessen the hold of Pakistan on the region by opening up alternate trade routes to Afghanistan.
- Reduced the maneuver space for other regional players such as India and removed encouragement to regional mechanisms and solutions for the resolution of conflict in Afghanistan.

- Curtailed the positive influence Iran would have exerted in the development of Western Afghanistan, protection of minorities and support to women's rights.

Conclusion

The US-Iran animus has not only changed the direction of the US policy in the region but it has also impact the complexion of bilateral relation US has maintained with the various countries in the region. The US presence in Afghanistan is so overbearing that Russian interests and Chinese involvement take a back seat. Nevertheless U.S. interests would be best served by supporting efforts to extend and improve governance and security in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, thereby depriving al-Qaida and its epigones of refuge on either side of the border.

US should consider how its improved relations with Iran could further long-term US policy goals in Afghanistan and in the region. While the future of U.S.-Iranian relations remains unclear, any improvement in the relationship would facilitate the success of US-supported initiatives in Afghanistan and create space for regional players and for initiatives aimed at shifting more responsibility for Afghanistan's reconstruction to the states of the region. Successful US engagement with Iran would necessarily address Iran's legitimate security interests on its eastern frontier, as well as its broader economic and political interests in Afghanistan.

Engaging Iran as one of Afghanistan's key neighbors as US and NATO/ISAF withdraws would enhance prospects for a peaceful exit; improve prospects for peace in the region and result in meaningful Afghan-Iran relations.

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