



Afghanistan: the view from Iran

by Walter Posch

Tehran's policy towards Afghanistan is defined by three strategic aims: first, to maintain good relations based on mutual economic benefits with the landlocked country; second, to prevent it from again plunging into civil war (and thereby avoid the negative knock-on effects this may have on Iran's domestic situation); and, third, to ensure that its eastern neighbour will not serve as a base for any form of aggression against the Islamic Republic. These strategic aims are consistent with the belief that Iran cannot disentangle itself from Afghan affairs even if it so desired. Even observers traditionally critical of Iranian foreign policy acknowledge the importance of Afghanistan for Iran's security, and have expressed some understanding for Iran's perceived need to maintain a strong presence in the country.

In order to achieve its goals, Tehran has employed a set of political tools ranging from diplomacy and intelligence gathering to economic and cultural activities. Iranian policies have sought to strengthen economic relations with the central government and/or regional stakeholders, facilitate the development of an efficient network of Shiite and pro-Iranian charitable and educational institutions, and curb drug trafficking. But they have also entailed a mixture of cooperation and confrontation with both the US and the Taliban.

It's complicated

In theory at least, all of the measures taken by Tehran favour stability over ideology, and reflect a posture of

pragmatism. In reality, Tehran faces the same problem as any other country in Afghanistan – namely, how to balance short-term necessities with long-term interests. Often, Iran finds itself facing dilemmas that are extremely hard to solve. For instance, Afghanistan's attempts to develop its own upstream hydroelectric facilities on the Helmand River and make use of water from the Hari River for agricultural purposes would serve Iran's main aim in Afghanistan – achieving stability based on economic development. However, Tehran is trying to prevent Kabul from doing so because of the overcrowded Iranian cities downstream which are dependent on those waters. In this regard, Iran also acts as a spoiler, thereby undermining the otherwise positive role it plays in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and damaging its image in the country.

The heavy-handedness towards (and regular expulsions of) Afghan refugees in Iran, as well as the harassment of other Afghan nationals by Iranian officials have also not gone unnoticed by the Afghan public. This includes Afghanistan's Shiites who, while still being overwhelmingly in favour of good relations with the Islamic Republic, increasingly reject its tutelage. No longer fully dependent on their religious kin, Shiite Afghans now look beyond Iran for educational or economic opportunities – to India, for instance, but also to Europe (which admittedly remains hard to reach).

Iran's own economic crisis has also had negative effects in Afghanistan, leading to cuts in funding for

charities and educational institutions – at least in cases where the money comes from official sources. As a result, private initiatives directed towards the various Afghan Shiite groups have gained importance. This does not mean that Tehran has lost all the ‘soft’ power it once wielded in the country: it simply faces a more diverse and more confident Afghan Shiite community than a decade ago. This, in turn, makes the establishment of a proxy organisation (comparable to Hizbullah in Lebanon) less likely.

The protracted presence of foreign troops and, now, the return of the Taliban pose additional problems for the Iranian leadership. On the one hand, Tehran welcomed the expulsion of the Taliban. On the other, it was deeply suspicious of the strong US-led international presence in a neighbouring country. Tehran’s main source of concern was the Bagram airbase and other similar facilities, which, aside from enabling day-to-day reconnaissance and intelligence activities along Iran’s borders (and beyond), could also permit the launching of a sophisticated airborne attack on the Islamic Republic.

Iran employed a two-pronged approach in order to protect its interests in its immediate vicinity. First, it stepped up its own intelligence activities against the US and its allies (occasionally Tehran also supported anti-Western activities of Taliban splinter groups whilst avoiding direct confrontation at all costs).

Second, the Iranians used – and will continue to use – all their influence with the Afghan government to prevent it from signing a Status of Forces Agreement that would allow the US to maintain a significant military presence in the country. Instead, Tehran has pushed for a comprehensive Iranian-Afghan agreement which combines economic and security aspects.

Odd bedfellows?

At first sight, Iran’s rejection of US-Afghan military cooperation looks like a continuation of Iran’s anti-imperialist policies. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that the Iranian government’s position was designed to reassure specific constituencies inside Iran. Beyond that, it can be seen as a pragmatic recognition of the fact that the US and its allies are set to leave Afghanistan anyway.

But merely stating in public that Afghans should provide for their own security – as President Rouhani did in December 2013 – will not be enough to guarantee that Iran’s old nemesis, the

Taliban, will be kept in check in the future. On the contrary, most observers in Iran fear a resurgence of Taliban activities when the US (largely) withdraws from the country at the end of 2014. There is therefore the potential risk that parts of Afghanistan once again become hubs for international terrorism. More radical elements of the Taliban could (re)connect with al-Qaida-inspired groups worldwide, and Iran’s fight against al-Qaida – currently being played out in Syria and Iraq – would gain another front much closer to home. Iran would be forced to tackle the new threat head on, not via proxies and partners – something which Tehran has always been keen to avoid. The Iranian government will thus do its best to strengthen (virtually) any central authority in Kabul.

Supporting the Afghan government and preventing the Taliban from seizing power are key concerns shared by both Iran and the West. Accordingly, some Iranian experts argue in favour of direct US-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan – and beyond. This is easier said than done, however. While Iran and the US cooperated during the invasion of Afghanistan back in 2001, and a common interest (defeating the Taliban) proved enough for both sides to momentarily put their ideological and strategic competition aside, a shift in either of their long-term strategies did not materialise.

Given the growing threats currently posed by global jihadists, security-driven incentives for Washington and Tehran to cooperate may appear even stronger than a decade ago. But with the Afghanistan chapter more or less closed in the eyes of the West, it is hard to imagine that Iran’s fear of the emergence of a neo-Taliban could provide enough common ground for renewed cooperation.

In other words, the dramatic situation on the ground in Afghanistan and its potential connection with international jihadi groups do not provide enough political incentives for systematic cooperation between Iran and the West. This does not mean that such cooperation is undesirable, but it would only be possible following a major breakthrough in the 3+3 negotiations. If achieved, this could compel both sides to review their bilateral relations, and allow Iran to contribute to the region-wide common fight against al-Qaida and its affiliates.

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