

Karzai visit further strengthens Afghanistan-Iran ties

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Background

In another sign of growing ties between Afghanistan and Iran, Afghan President Hamid Karzai attended the Iranian-sponsored conference on counterterrorism co-operation in Tehran on 25-26 June, which was also attended by the Presidents of Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, Sudan and Tajikistan. The visit was indicative of the strengthening relations between Afghanistan and Iran, which share a 936-kilometre border, and see themselves as increasingly important to each other's long-term interests.

Comment

In recent years, there has been a flurry of diplomatic activity between the two countries. For instance, last month Iranian Defence Minister, General Ahmad Vahidi, visited Kabul, which marked the first such visit by an Iranian defence minister.



The significance of the visit was outlined by the remarks made by General Vahidi who affirmed: 'Iran considers Afghanistan's security as its own security, [and] has put a

lot of effort towards stability in Afghanistan and will continue to help in this regard.' A similar visit was also made in March this year, when Iran's Interior Minister, Mostafa Mohammad Najjar, visited Afghanistan with a senior delegation.



Afghan-Iran relations have continued to expand since the advent of US intervention in Afghanistan, despite US efforts to isolate Iran. In the areas of trade and investment, Iran has played a role in fostering economic growth and infrastructure development, including plans to build a rail link connecting Mashhad to Herat, with the eventual aim of connecting Tehran and Kabul. Around one-third of Afghanistan's energy requirements pass through Iran, and in 2010, bilateral trade reached an historic milestone of US\$1 billion.

Iran's growing influence in Afghanistan, as a partner in its future security and stability, has evidently caused friction with the US. Despite US accusations of Iranian collusion with the Taliban, which are yet to be proven, for decades Iran has backed anti-Taliban elements and retains a strong vested interest

in preventing any Taliban resurgence.

As any US exit strategy will aim to maintain US influence in Afghanistan, deciding how best to deal with Iran, while preventing any Taliban resurgence, will remain a major US policy dilemma. Given that a US-Iran rapprochement appears unlikely in the foreseeable future, US planners will need to make hard decisions in formulating a viable Afghanistan exit strategy plan.

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Editorial

Multilayered complexity on the field of Afghanistan

By Dr. John Bruni, Director SAGE International, Adelaide, South Australia

The exit strategy for the United States in Afghanistan took an interesting turn when the half-brother of President Hamid Karzai, Ahmed Wali Karzai, was killed by one of his security guards on the morning of July 12, 2011.

The assassination of a senior figure such as Ahmed Wali Karzai demonstrates the frailty of the security situation and the continuing vulnerabilities Karzai and his inner circle are exposed to while trying to contain Taliban or 'narco-warlord' inspired violence. With Kabul unable to exercise exclusive political authority outside of the Afghan capital, and the political legitimacy of the Karzai regime

remaining highly dependent on foreign allies, it is with great interest to note that continuing US-India dialogue might see New Delhi, already a significant player in Afghan affairs, take on a greater role in that beleaguered country.

India's concern is with countering a return of overt Pakistani influence in Afghanistan which could see the country turn into a sanctuary for anti-Indian Muslim fundamentalist groups such as Lashkar-e-Toiba.

Lashkar-e-Taiba
Pakistan-based radical Islamic group suspected of training the Mumbai attackers

Lashkar-e-Taiba: "Army of the Pious"

- Founded by Hafiz Mohammad Saeed in 1989
- Established to fight Indian control of disputed Kashmir
- Headquarters in Muridke
- On the US watchlist of terrorist organisations
- Banned in Britain, several other western countries
- Now run by Qari Abdul Wahid Kashmiri

Previous link to terror

- Blamed for the December 2001 attacks on Indian parliament that brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war

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A greater Indian role in Afghanistan would allow New Delhi to step-up and take a leading role in Afghan security as the US begins to step down from this responsibility. However, in the medium term, it also opens up the possibility of increased Pakistani-Indian tensions as both countries manipulate local factions to outmanoeuvre each other on the Hindu Kush. For India, the less enticing prospect is that it may get bogged down in a

protracted struggle to contain revanchist Pakistani aspirations in Afghanistan while attempting to divine how best to use Iran's perceived hold over the Afghan's predominantly Shia Hazara communities to its advantage.

Iranian Defence Minister image:

http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/46255000/jpg/46255862_007827848-1.jpg

Karzai-Najjar image:

http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/kyoto_protocol_2002_target_status

Lashkar-e-Toiba image:

http://isrovation.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/fukushima_01.jpg

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