



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry

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Afghanistan is one of several contexts in which the long-term common interests of the U.S. and Iran have been overshadowed by the animus originating in the 1953 CIA-led coup in Iran and the Iranian revolution of 1979, to the detriment of the interests of the U.S., Iran, and Afghanistan. This confrontation has served the interests of the Pakistan military, Taliban, and al-Qaida. Re-establishing the basis for U.S.-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan would provide significant additional leverage over Pakistan, on whose territory the leadership of both the Taliban and al-Qaida are now found.

During the first half of the Cold War (until the 1978 coup in Afghanistan and the 1979 revolution in Iran), Afghanistan was a non-aligned country with a Soviet-trained army wedged between the USSR and U.S. allies. In the 1970s, under the Nixon Doctrine, the U.S. supported efforts by the Shah of Iran to use his post-1973 oil wealth to support efforts by Afghan President Muhammad Daoud to lessen Kabul's dependence on the USSR. This ended with the successive overthrow of both Daoud and the Shah in 1978 and 1979. A U.S. close partnership with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan emerged as the primary means of maintaining U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf and its eastern flank. Support for Sunni Islamists in Afghanistan and an Islamist-oriented military regime in Pakistan formed parts of this strategy to repulse the USSR from its occupation of Afghanistan, begun in late 1979, and to isolate Iran.

The U.S. led support for the mujahidin based in Pakistan and a greatly enlarged Pakistani security establishment, with co-funding from Saudi Arabia and implementation largely in

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the hands of Pakistan's Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence. The ISI also nurtured the Sunni right wing in Pakistan to counter-balance the Pakistan People's Party and ethnic sub-nationalists. Revolutionary Iran, distracted by its war with Iraq, provided aid to Afghan Shi'a groups that supported the revolutionary line of Khomeini, but did not engage fully.

Post Soviet: Oil and Taliban

The dissolution of the USSR and independence of the Central Asian and Caucasus states in 1991-92 led to the disengagement of the U.S. from the region, reducing external support to the Pakistan-Saudi alliance and providing Iran with more opportunities for maneuver in Afghanistan. Iran broadened its contacts in Afghanistan from Shi'a groups to non-Pashtun groups more generally (including Sunnis and former government militias), helping to broker the formation of the so-called "Northern Alliance" during the 1992 collapse of the Najibullah government.

The opening of Central Asia and the Caspian region to the international oil and gas market created a new strategic stake. Russia aimed to maintain its monopoly on export of these resources through the former Soviet pipeline network. The U.S. sought to promote the autonomy of the Newly Independent States (as they were called) by supporting alternative pipeline routes and hydrocarbon development schemes. But the shortest and most secure routes from the former USSR's energy resources to the sea lay through Iran, which the U.S. had kept under sanctions since the Tehran embassy takeover.

Iran proposed to become the transport hub for both oil and gas, linking the Central Asian-Caspian region to the Persian Gulf. The main focus of U.S. hydrocarbon strategy was the route north and west of Iran, which ultimately led to the construction of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Afghanistan played a role in the secondary theater of the southern and eastern outlet, as the U.S. mildly supported Pakistan's attempts to use the Taliban to provide a secure transport corridor from Pakistan to Turkmenistan via western Afghanistan. Iran saw this as part of the U.S. strategy of encircling and containing Iran.

When Lakhdar Brahimi became the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Afghanistan in 1997, he found that the Government of Iran believed that the U.S., Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia were jointly supporting the Taliban in continuation of their previous policies. Iran consequently saw the Taliban as the spear-point of its strategic opponent and joined with Russia, India, and the Central Asian states in an effort to support and supply the Northern Alliance. Iran moved beyond its ideological support for Shi'a parties to a strategic policy of supporting all anti-Taliban forces. It settled its differences over Tajikistan with Russia, and the two states brokered the 1997 peace agreement in order to assure a consolidated rear for the Northern Alliance.

Events in August 1998 turned both the U.S. and Iran further against the Taliban. With Pakistan's assistance, the Taliban captured control of most of northern Afghanistan; Pakistani extremists under Taliban command massacred nine Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i Sharif, leading Iran to mobilize troops on the border.¹ Diplomacy by Brahimi averted open warfare. The same week, al-Qaida, then operating out of the Taliban's Kandahar headquarters, attacked the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Consequently the U.S. began intelligence cooperation with the Northern Alliance. The State Department conducted a dialogue with Iran within the framework of the UN-convened "Six plus Two" group, which included Afghanistan's neighbors, the U.S., and Russia. Pakistan became increasingly isolated in the group. The U.S. and Russia jointly approved Security Council sanctions against the Taliban and al-Qaida, with the support of Iran and against the wishes of Pakistan, which flouted the sanctions.

Since 9/11

After 9/11, despite some jockeying for relative advantage, Russia, Iran, India and the United States ultimately cooperated to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan, and to establish the new Afghan government. Not only did Iran cooperate with the United States, Russia actively helped it establish support bases in Central Asia. Pakistan was politically marginalized in the process.

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U.S.-Iranian cooperation occurred both in the field, in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and in diplomacy, where I personally witnessed it. According to Iranian diplomatic sources, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, Sipah-i Pasdaran) cooperated with the CIA and U.S. Special Operations Forces in supplying and funding the commanders of the Northern Alliance. During the war in the fall of 2001, both Russia and Iran wavered between supporting the reconquest of power by President Burhanuddin Rabbani and the plan for a broader political settlement supported by the followers of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the UN, and the U.S.

At the UNTalks on Afghanistan in Bonn, Germany, which negotiated the agreements governing the political transition in Afghanistan, U.S. and Iranian envoys James Dobbins and Javad Zarif cooperated closely on all major issues. Zarif supported efforts to frustrate Rabbani's goal of preventing the meeting from reaching agreement in the hope of consolidating his own power and forestalling formation of a broader government. Zarif's last-minute intervention with the Northern Alliance delegation chair, Yunus Qanuni, convinced the latter to reduce the number of cabinet posts he demanded in the interim administration.²

The U.S. and Iran jointly insisted that the Bonn agreement contain a timetable for national elections and require the Afghan administration to cooperate in the fight against terrorism and drugs. Dobbins had to overcome resistance from hard-liners in the Department of Defense in order to cooperate with Iran, but his brief from Secretary of State Colin Powell enabled him to do so. Zarif, affiliated with the reformist trend of President Muhammad Khatami, may similarly have had to overcome resistance. In informal conversation, where I was present as a member of the UN delegation, U.S. diplomats told the Iranians that other issues prevented broader cooperation; the Iranians replied by asking to discuss all issues between the two countries.

The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarded these events as an opportunity to increase cooperation with the U.S. from Afghanistan to a wider set of issues. Dobbins reports that Iranian officials later offered to work under U.S. command to assist in building the Afghan National Army.³ U.S.-Iranian cooperation in building the Afghan security forces would have constituted a major investment in realignment to the detriment of Pakistan, whose military counted on monopolizing the role as the U.S.'s intermediaries with Afghanistan as leverage to assure the U.S.-Pakistan military supply relationship.

The Bush administration, however, rejected the initiative. Instead, it charged Iran with "harboring" an Afghan opposition figure and Islamist leader, Gulbiddin Hekmatyar, who was supported by U.S. aid to the mujahidin in the 1980s, and who had sought refuge in Tehran after having been abandoned by Pakistan for the Taliban in 1995. Iran expelled him.⁴ U.S. officials also charged that Iran was establishing influence in Herat, which would be somewhat akin to accusing the U.S. of exercising influence over northern Mexico.⁵ Additionally, the U.S. alleged that members of al-Qaida had taken refuge in Iran.⁶ Some may have done so with the collaboration of local IRGC commanders, but the overwhelming fact

was that the surviving core leadership of al-Qaida all made its way to Pakistan, where their logistics and networks had been based and where they remained.

Afghan in the Middle

President Bush signaled decisively that cooperation in Afghanistan would not lead to a broader rapprochement with Iran when he included Iran in the "Axis of Evil" in his January 2002 State of the Union speech. Subsequently he also named Pakistan as the U.S.'s closest non-NATO ally. In this, the Bush administration showed that the events of 9/11 had not at all dissuaded it from perpetuating the historic mistake of considering Afghanistan a sideshow and subordinating policy toward that country to broader strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and Middle East, above all, the conflict with Iran.

Even the revelation that Pakistan had been the main source of nuclear weapons proliferation to Iran, North Korea, and Libya, did not change the U.S. orientation. Pakistan's actual nuclear weapons and proliferation activity were considered less threatening than Iran's potential ones. The Bush administration also failed even to monitor Pakistan's activities in support of a revived Taliban and the development of a new safe haven for al-Qaida in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

The Afghan government responded to the growing threat, which it saw as mainly coming from Pakistan, by asking the U.S. to sign a Declaration for Strategic Partnership, which Presidents Karzai and Bush did in Washington in May 2005. Tehran responded by asking President Karzai to sign a declaration of strategic partnership with Iran that, among its provisions, committed Afghanistan not to permit its territory to be used for military or intelligence operations against Iran. The message was clear: Iran would accept Afghanistan's strategic partnership with the United States, but only if it is not directed against Iran.

President Karzai responded that he would like to sign such a declaration, but that his government was not in a position to prevent the United States from using its territory against Iran. The Iranians said that they knew that, but would like such a statement anyway, and that without such a declaration, President Karzai would not be welcome in Tehran for the August 2005 inauguration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. A phone call to President Karzai from a cabinet officer in Washington forbade the Afghan President from signing any such declaration or attending the inauguration. A few months later, in January 2006, another phone call forbade Karzai to travel to Tehran to sign economic agreements.

In early 2007, Washington reported that Iran had started to supply sophisticated arms to the Taliban in western Afghanistan.⁷ Iran had also increased political and military support to the former Northern Alliance, which had formed the core of the opposition National Front in parliament.

In the summer of 2007, as calls for "regime change" and a pre-emptive attack on Iran's nuclear program escalated in Washington, Tehran formally changed its policy toward the U.S. in

Afghanistan. Previously, according to Iranian diplomats, Tehran's position was that even if the U.S. attacked Iran, Iran would not respond in Afghanistan. Iran's bilateral interest in stability in Afghanistan and in supporting the Karzai government as a bulwark against the Taliban and al-Qaida outweighed any advantage that would result from attacking the U.S. presence. If, however, Iran were attacked by the U.S. from Afghanistan, it might indeed respond there. Iran had opposed the mention of NATO in the January 2006 Afghanistan Compact and had called for a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops, but it had agreed to the Compact despite these objections. At an ambassadors' conference in Tehran in August 2007, however, Iranian diplomats were told that if Iran were attacked by the United States, it would respond fully against U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, regardless of its bilateral interests in those two countries. "Afghanistan is our friend," one participant was quoted as saying, "But when your life is at stake you may have to sacrifice even your friends."

The U.S. continued to charge Iran with providing support to the Taliban, while remaining publicly silent over Pakistan's far larger support to the Taliban. Iran continued to deny such support, but even Afghan officials with no particular grudge against Iran claim that intelligence data support the contention 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, not to change the military balance significantly. Iran clearly did not want the Taliban to win, but it did not want the U.S. to feel secure in Afghanistan either.⁸

Iran (along with Russia and India) has also looked with skepticism on proposals to include the Taliban in any kind of a political settlement. According to Iranian diplomats, Tehran sees such ideas not as a broadening of the peace process but rather the U.S. returning to its policy of subcontracting Afghan policy to Pakistan. Such a move would be consistent with the U.S. realignment in Iraq, where the U.S. forces have armed and paid former groups of the Sunni resistance, while publicly charging Iran with destabilizing a government over which Tehran has enormous influence.

The Iranian suspicions have a basis in fact: Pakistani interlocutors often invoke the Iranian threat with Americans to convince them to eliminate the Northern Alliance from the Afghan government and strike a deal with the insurgents. There are also charges that the U.S. is using Afghanistan and Pakistan as bases for covert support to Baluch or Sunni Islamist insurgents in Iran, such as Jundullah.⁹ U.S. political leaders often issue statements naming Iran as the main state sponsor of terrorism, at the same time that U.S. intelligence agencies have unambiguously identified Pakistan, especially al-Qaida controlled parts of the FATA, as the major source of international terrorist threats.

Alternative Approaches

The U.S. government should first of all recognize privately and publicly that it has many common interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan with Iran, whatever differences it may have on other issues. During the first few years of the Afghanistan operation (through the ambassadorship of Zalmay Khalilzad, who left in 2005), the U.S. and Iran carried on regular discussions on subjects

of mutual interest in Kabul. The U.S. should offer to renew such discussions with no further conditions. Several officials of the government of Iran, who may not represent the current policy, have asked to renew such talks, especially to exchange information on the threat from al-Qaida in the FATA.

There is also room for discussion on many specific issues, including counter-narcotics, economic cooperation, and border security.¹⁰ One issue that may require U.S.-Iranian cooperation is the need to hold a presidential election in September 2009, according to the Afghan Constitution. The security conditions are hardly conducive to such an election; even if it were held, the results are much more likely to be contested in the streets than were the results in 2004. Iran is in a position of influence with many of the leaders who might challenge President Karzai and can either aggravate or mitigate the aftermath. If the security situation worsens to the point that it may not be possible to organize a contested election, Iran's cooperation would be indispensable for convincing key leaders to accept any alternative, such as a Loya Jirga.

It is not clear what the reaction of the Iranian government would be to such offers at this point. Those in the foreign policy establishment who had cooperated with the U.S. in Afghanistan have been sidelined in the past year in favor of more hard-line figures. It may be that, while President Ahmadinejad is ideologically committed to an apocalyptic style of politics, conservative members of the Iranian establishment are more concerned with the issue of "regime change." As long as the U.S. maintains a significant level of ambiguity about its support for forcibly overthrowing or subverting the Islamic Republic, Tehran is not likely to make its common interests with the U.S. in Afghanistan (or Iraq) a higher priority than strategic opposition. The obstacle is not the willingness of the U.S. to use force (as in repeated statements by the administration and presidential candidates that "all options remain on the table"), but the objective for which force *might* be used: regime change.

It might well be possible to take incremental actions as confidence building measures, such as those mentioned above (open dialogue, exchange of information, operational collaboration on technical issues, including counter-narcotics interdiction). But the U.S. will not be able to determine how far it can progress on these tracks until it tries. Even small attempts will reassure the Afghan government and increase the pressure on Pakistan by threatening to remove the monopoly it holds over U.S. logistical access to Afghanistan.

There is, however, a major strategic judgment to be revisited. The military and intelligence agencies of both Pakistan and Iran have systematically used asymmetrical warfare, including terrorism, as a tool of their security policy. Which of them poses a greater threat to U.S. national interest and international peace and security? How should responses to these two threats be balanced? Since the Iranian revolution, the U.S. has overreacted to the Iranian threat and engaged in systematic appeasement of Pakistan, which is now home to the leadership of both al-Qaida and the Taliban (both Afghan and Pakistani). These countries are rivals for influence in Afghanistan and are sponsoring competing infrastructure projects

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In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@mit.edu, 617.253.1965)

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for road transport and energy trade. Iran and India are building a combined rail and road link from the Iranian port of Chah Bahar to Afghanistan's major highway. Pakistan, with Chinese aid, is building the port of Gwadar in Baluchistan, aiming at a north-south route to Central Asia. "Taliban" regularly attack Indian road building crews in southwest Afghanistan, and Pakistan charges that India is supporting Baluch insurgents from its consulates in Afghanistan.

A reevaluation of the threats originating in Iran and Pakistan should lead to a recalibration of U.S. policy in Afghanistan to tilt away from Pakistan and more toward Iran. Yet it would be wrong and destructive to treat Pakistan with the type of enmity now reserved for Iran. Like Iran, Pakistan's policy is motivated by a combination of genuine security threats, ideological aspirations, and institutional interest. In Pakistan's more open political system, it is far easier for the U.S. to engage with allies inside the country against the security services whose covert policies the U.S. finds threatening.

Ultimately, 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. Using Afghanistan as a base for anti-Iran policies handicaps the U.S. in pressing for Pakistani cooperation, thus undermining one of the country's most important strategic objectives. Of course, such recalibration will also require shifts in Iranian policy away from the path it has taken. Clearly abandoning any U.S. agenda of forcible regime change in Iran will make such a shift much more likely.

footnotes

1 Douglas Jehl, "Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats' Deaths" *The New York Times*, September 11, 1998.

2 James Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation Building in Afghanistan* (Potomac Books, 2008).

3 Ibid.

4 On his expulsion, see the BBC: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1842427.stm.

5 Eric Schmitt, "Iran Exerts Sway in Afghan Region, Worrying the U.S.," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2002.

6 See also Pam O'Toole, "Iran Defends Role in Afghanistan," *BBC News*, January 11, 2002 available here: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1754282.stm.

7 Declan Walsh, "US Accuses Iran of Supplying Arms to Taliban Insurgents" *The Guardian*, April 19, 2007.

8 While there is no official data available on this, this is the consensus of intelligence officials with whom the author has spoken.

9 Seymour Hersh's article in *The New Yorker* came out during the second round of this paper's edits, and further supports claims of US support for Sunni minority groups and dissident organizations that target Iran. The article is available here: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/07/080707fa_fact_hersh.

10 For instance, in 2006, 53 percent of all opiates from Afghanistan were trafficked via Iran. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *2007 World Drug Report*. Available in pdf format here: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/WDR-2007.html>.



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