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## Iran, US and the Afghan Conundrum

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### Abstract

*The difficult US-Iran relations have further complicated the search for an 'end game' in Afghanistan. The ongoing talks of the yet-to-be-inked US-Afghan Strategic Partnership deal has raised concerns in Iran of a prolonged US military presence beyond 2014. While the US and Iran share a common goal of preventing the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the dynamics of the great power relations could impede the process of effective transition and create long-term instability in the war-torn country.*

The ongoing discussions about a long-term security agreement between the United States and Afghanistan, termed 'US-Afghan Strategic Partnership', outlining the prospect of American troops prolonging their stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014 has caused considerable disquiet in the region. These secretive negotiations come amid a scramble among regional powers to position themselves for what senior US officers are now describing as the 'out years' and are seen in the region as leading to the beginning of another 'Great Game'. According to the details of the yet-to-be-formalised US-Afghan Strategic Partnership, limited US troop presence (20,000-30,000) carrying out specialised counter-terrorism operations and secondary support, mentoring and air power back-up to the Afghan forces would be based in at least five bases for the next two or three decades.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The views and findings are based on the author's interactions with key Afghan interlocutors and stakeholders in May-June 2011 and US officials, policymakers and academia in Washington, DC in May 2011. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, *The Emerging Faultlines of the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership*, ISAS Brief No. 210, (10 August 2011), [http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS\\_Brief\\_210\\_-\\_Email\\_-\\_The\\_Emerging\\_Faultlines\\_150820111153\\_35.pdf](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Brief_210_-_Email_-_The_Emerging_Faultlines_150820111153_35.pdf). Accessed on 18 August 2011. Ben Farmer, US troops may stay in Afghanistan until 2024, *The Telegraph* (19 August 2011), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/ne>

## Iran's Perception of US Involvement in Post-2014 Afghanistan: Engagement or Encirclement?

Neighbouring countries like Iran are vociferous in stating opposition<sup>3</sup> to any arrangement that will allow the US to position itself firmly in a country which shares a 936-kilometre-long border with the Islamic republic. Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar has been categorical in stating that a strategic treaty between the US and Afghanistan will pose a threat to the interests of Iran and other regional countries. Iran has repeatedly maintained that outsiders are not capable of establishing security in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

In 2001, Iranian and American interests coincided in Afghanistan and both sent military advisers, money and weapons to help the Northern Alliance fight the Taliban. Many in the US concede that the most constructive period of US-Iranian diplomacy since the fall of the Shah of Iran took place in the months after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the US.<sup>5</sup> Iran played a constructive role in the Bonn process in 2002. However the situation changed dramatically with the Bush administration policies towards Iran being dominated by the Iraq war and nuclear issues. President George Bush's listing of Iran among the 'axis of evil' was viewed as a surprising payback for Tehran's cooperation on Afghanistan in Bonn.<sup>6</sup>

Concerns over Iran's nuclear programme and allegations of arming militants in the region notwithstanding, Gen David H. Petraeus, commander of US forces in the region, stated in 2009 that Washington and Iran could coalesce in stabilising Afghanistan. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, echoed a similar sentiment in late January 2009.<sup>7</sup> These overtures by US military officials have been followed by concrete steps by the Obama Administration to include Iran in discussions on a regional solution for Afghanistan.

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ws/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/ 8712701/US-troops-may-stay-in-Afghanistan-until-2024.html. Accessed on 20 August 2011.

<sup>3</sup> 'U.S.-Afghan strategic treaty will endanger Iran's interests: minister', *Tehran Times* (24 July 2011), [http://old.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=244580](http://old.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=244580). Accessed on 15 August 2011. Iran's Envoy Renews Opposition to US Permanent Bases in Afghanistan, *FARS News Agency, Tehran* (12 April 2011), <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9001231848>. Accessed on 1 August 2011.

<sup>4</sup> 'U.S.-Afghan strategic treaty will endanger Iran's interests: minister', *Tehran Times* (24 July 2011), [http://old.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=244580](http://old.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=244580). Accessed on 15 August 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Following the 9/11 attacks, the United States joined the Northern Alliance which aided by massive American airpower, drove the Taliban from power. The coalition then worked closely with the United States to secure agreement among all elements of the Afghan opposition on the formation of a broadly based successor to the Taliban regime. James Dobbins, 'Engaging Iran' in Robin Wright (ed.), 'The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy', United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, December 2010.

<sup>6</sup> A year later, shortly after the invasion of Iraq, all US bilateral contacts with Tehran were suspended. Since then, confrontation over Iran's nuclear programme has intensified. Washington has accused Iran of supplying Iraqi militias and Afghan insurgents with weapons to attack American troops. Iran, for its part, has arrested several Iranian-American citizens on what appear to be spurious charges. James Dobbins, 'How to Talk to Iran', *The Washington Post* (22 July 2007), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072002056.html>. Accessed on 1 August 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Bruno and Lionel Beehner, Iran and the Future of Afghanistan, *Backgrounder, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC* (30 March 2009), <http://www.cfr.org/iran/iran-future-afghanistan/p13578>. Accessed on 19 July 2011.

On 20 March 2009, President Barack Obama reached out to Iran through a televised address in which he offered a ‘new beginning’<sup>8</sup> in resetting US ties with Iran. In his new strategy for the Afghan war, President Obama supported Germany's calls for a ‘contact group’ and listed Iran as a key player.<sup>9</sup> Iranian and American officials held their first talks about ending the war in Afghanistan under the Russian initiative amid signs that President Obama’s efforts to reset relations with Tehran were paying off.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these attempts, the overarching differences on the nuclear issues and allegations of Iran’s covert support to the insurgents<sup>11</sup> have stymied prospects of achieving any tangible cooperation on Afghanistan. With the increasing acrimony and deterioration of relations, Iran now wants the US and its NATO allies to pull their troops out from Afghanistan. Iran’s fears of US troop presence near its borders was heightened with the 300-hectare airbase being built by the US in the desert area of Holang in Ghorian district of Herat province, just 45 kilometres from the Iranian frontier. The US military and the Afghan government state that the base is being built for the Afghan National Army. Some experts, however, opine that this base can put Iran’s entire air space under American domination.<sup>12</sup> Since 2004, the Shindand airbase in the same Herat province has been renovated and grown triple in size to become the second largest military airbase in Afghanistan next to that of Bagram.<sup>13</sup>

### **US and Iran Manoeuvres: Covert Games, Overt Accusations**

The difficult US-Iran relationship is said to have contributed to the instability in Afghanistan in the last decade. US officials have long maintained that Iran has been a source of destabilisation in Afghanistan and Iraq. They have accused Tehran of extending its anti-US position to aid the insurgency. Speaking to the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2011, General Petraeus testified that Iran had provided support for Taliban insurgents in ‘measured amounts’ -- enough ‘to make life difficult for us, but not enough actually to

<sup>8</sup> Jason Djang, A New Year, A New Beginning, *The White House Blog* (19 March 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/Nowruz/>. Accessed on 13 August 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Jesse Lee, A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, *The White House Blog* (27 March 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/A-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/>. Accessed on 15 July 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Christina Lamb, US and Iran open Afghanistan peace talks, *The Sunday Times* (29 March 2009), [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article5993094.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article5993094.ece). Accessed on 2 August 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Iran Remains Top Terror Sponsor, *Voice of America, Middle East* (26 August 2011), <http://www.voanews.com/policy/editorials/middle-east/Iran-Remains--128507928.html>. Accessed on 27 August 2011. Captured Taliban Commander: ‘I Received Iranian Training’, *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty* (23 August 2011), [http://www.rferl.org/content/captured\\_taliban\\_commander\\_claimstrained\\_in\\_iran/24305674.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/captured_taliban_commander_claimstrained_in_iran/24305674.html). Accessed on 24 August 2011.

<sup>12</sup> US Building Big Army Base Near Iran Border, *Daily Times, Pakistan* (29 November 2004), <http://www.rense.com/general60/USbuildingbigarmybase.htm>. Accessed on 21 August 2011.

<sup>13</sup> John Robles, ‘US Afghan strategy: senseless, merciless’, *The Nation* (23 July 2011), <http://nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/International/23-Jul-2011/US-Afghan-strategy-senseless-merciless>. Accessed on 17 August 2011.

succeed'.<sup>14</sup> On 28 July 2011, David S. Cohen, the Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, announced that Iran had entered a 'secret deal' with an al-Qaeda offshoot that provided money and recruits for attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> Senior NATO commanders have warned repeatedly that Iran is supplying the insurgency with weapons, money and even training at camps on the Iranian side of the border. In May 2010, Gen Stanley A. McChrystal, then the NATO commander in Afghanistan, warned that Iran was training Afghan fighters inside Iran. In March 2011, Adm Mullen told Congress that these sizable weapons shipments from Iran had been intercepted.<sup>16</sup> Tehran has refuted these charges.

The Iranian government on the other hand charges the US to be aiding the Balochi Sunni insurgent group Jundullah, which has been responsible for killing several senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps officers. Iran has tried to substantiate its accusations with statements from the Jundullah leaders. In 2010, Iranian state television broadcast a statement by a captured Jundullah leader, Abdolmalek Rigi, in which he said that he received support from the US.<sup>17</sup> Although the US denies any such support and claims such statements to have been extracted under duress, the continuation of the Balochi insurgency with an impact on Iran's territorial integrity will most likely result in furthering Iranian actions that undermine US goals in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

### **Rationalising Tehran's Strategy in Post-Taliban Afghanistan**

The American presence in its neighbourhood Iraq and Afghanistan places immense pressure on Iran, which it seeks to offset by competing against the US for influence in these countries.

<sup>14</sup> In testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday, Petraeus confirmed that NATO had recently intercepted a weapons shipment that the British linked to Iran. According to Petraeus, Iran's Qods Force, a branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, provided 48 122-mm rockets to a 'known Taliban facilitator'. The rockets are twice the range of the 107-mm rockets the Taliban typically employ, with 'twice the bursting radius'. Spencer Ackerman, Petraeus Doesn't Sweat Iran's Rockets in Afghanistan (15 March 2011), <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/03/petraeus-doesnt-sweat-irans-rockets-in-afghanistan/>. Accessed on 18 March 2011.

<sup>15</sup> The Obama Administration has accused Iran of entering into a secret deal with an Al Qaeda offshoot that provides money and recruits for attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US Treasury Department designated six members of the unit as terrorists subject to American sanctions. The US intelligence community has in the past disagreed about the extent of direct links between the Iranian government and Al Qaeda. Matthew Lee and Bradley Klapper, 'Iran Accused Of Al-Qaeda "Secret Deal" By U.S. Officials', *Huffington Post* (28 July 2011), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/28/iran-al-qaeda-deal\\_n\\_912512.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/28/iran-al-qaeda-deal_n_912512.html). Accessed on 1 August 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Alissa J. Rubin, 'British Link Iran to Rockets Found in Afghan Province', *The New York Times* (9 March 2011), [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/10/world/middleeast/10iran.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/10/world/middleeast/10iran.html?_r=1). Accessed on 1 August 2011.

<sup>17</sup> 'Iran Jundullah leader claims US military support', *BBC* (26 February 2010), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8537567.stm>. Accessed on 17 August 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Alireza Nader & Joya Laha, 'Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan', *RAND*, Santa Monica, CA, 2011, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional\\_papers/2011/RAND\\_OP322.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2011/RAND_OP322.pdf). Accessed on 16 August 2011.

At the official level, Tehran's primary objectives are to secure its eastern flank by stabilising Afghanistan, which sends a steady flow of illicit weapons, narcotics, refugees and migrants into its territory. Shia Iran strongly opposes the return of the Sunni Taliban to power in Kabul. To this end, Iran's national interests in Afghanistan often coincide with US objectives. Iran's predominant interest is in having a stable Afghanistan as its neighbour, but since Afghanistan is neither safe nor stable, Iran will continue to play a 'double game'.<sup>19</sup>

Analysts argue that while such considerations and contradictions will have a strong bearing on US strategy in Afghanistan, it is also important to situate them within the 'broader tapestry' of Iran's diplomacy in Afghanistan and central Asia that does not necessarily preclude the possibility of US-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan. In Iranian foreign policy, it is possible to discern a recurring pattern -- while Tehran deals with neighbouring governments using official diplomatic channels, it also pursues a 'shadow diplomacy', sponsoring non-state proxies and seeking to expand its influence at the sub-governmental level.<sup>20</sup>

### **Iran's Soft Power Approach: Reconstruction, Trade and Development Aid**

One area in which Tehran has sought to exert influence in post-Taliban Afghanistan is in economic assistance and reconstruction. Besides playing an active role in the Bonn Conference, Iran pledged US\$560 million at the Tokyo Conference on the Reconstruction of Afghanistan in 2002, and an additional US\$100 million at the 2006 London Conference.<sup>21</sup> Iran has been active in Afghan reconstruction efforts, particularly in the western portion of the country in the provinces of Herat, Farah, and Nimruz. The Iranian government has funded several transportation and energy infrastructure projects, including building roads and railway links, setting up schools, and constructing Herat's electricity grid. Iran has created a sphere of influence and a security buffer zone in the industrial heartland of Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup>

Much of the Iranian aid to Afghanistan has been spent on infrastructure projects, mainly transportation links between Iran, Afghanistan and the central Asian republics, creating mechanisms of greater integration and dependence on Iran. A 123-kilometre road linking Herat in western Afghanistan to the Dogharoun region in Iran has already been completed,

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<sup>19</sup> Janne Bjerre Christensen, *Strained Alliances: Iran's Troubled Relations To Afghanistan And Pakistan*, Danish Institute For International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen 2011, [http://www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/Reports2011/RP2011-03-Strained-Alliances\\_web.pdf](http://www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/Reports2011/RP2011-03-Strained-Alliances_web.pdf). Accessed on 17 August 2011.

<sup>20</sup> This two-pronged approach is visible in Iranian dealings in the Gulf, in the Levant - Hezbollah in Lebanon springs immediately to mind and in Central Asia. Erin Fitzgerald, *Iran's Shadow Diplomacy*, *Huffington Post* (8 August 2011), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erinfitzgerald/iranshadowdiplomacy\\_b\\_920702.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erinfitzgerald/iranshadowdiplomacy_b_920702.html).

<sup>21</sup> Mohsen Milani, *Iran and Afghanistan, The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/iranprimer.usip.org/files/Iran%20and%20Afghanistan.pdf>. Accessed on 10 July 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Most of Iran's pledged reconstruction assistance, estimated at US\$660 million, is in Herat. Mohsen Milani, *Iran and Afghanistan, The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/iranprimer.usip.org/files/Iran%20and%20Afghanistan.pdf>. Accessed on 10 July 2011.

and work is underway to link Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman, which would alleviate Afghan dependence on the Pakistani port of Karachi. In January 2009, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee inaugurated a new road between Zaranj and Delaram, connecting Nimruz province to Chabahar in Iran. Iran has encouraged trade on this route, granting Afghan exporters a 90 per cent discount on port fees and a 50 per cent discount on warehousing charges and giving Afghan vehicles full transit rights on the Iranian road system.<sup>23</sup>

Commerce (excluding petroleum) between the two countries amounts to over a billion dollars a year.<sup>24</sup> 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 landlocked Afghanistan an outlet to trade with the world economy, increasing commerce while extending Iranian influence. Afghanistan represents a significant untapped export market for Iranian products. Therefore, Iran has sought to foster closer economic ties with its eastern neighbour since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Iran has also encouraged Afghan businesses to relocate their international offices from the United Arab Emirates to Iran.

Iran has extended some assistance to the Afghan government to enforce a stronger border control mechanism in its counter-narcotic efforts. It has built and handed over outposts to Afghan border guards. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has expressed Iran's willingness to help Afghanistan bring the cultivation of illicit drugs under control.<sup>25</sup> Of late, Iran has also drawn up a plan to legalise the presence of Afghan refugees in Iran. According to the plan, the Iranian foreign ministry will charge a fee of 300 Iranian rial from each Afghan national who plans to enter the country and will give the money back to them whenever they decide to leave Iran.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, its acrimonious relations with the US have prevented closer cooperation between the two countries in Afghanistan. Iran's strategy of balancing US and allied (Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) powers in the region, maintaining domination in the Islamic world and deterring a US attack on its nuclear facilities have instead facilitated Iranian support for the Taliban<sup>27</sup> albeit measured. Having thus gained 'strategic depth' in western Afghanistan, Iran

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<sup>23</sup> The 215-km highway, which was financed by the Indian government and built by its Border Roads Organisation, was completed at the end of 2008. The road has encouraged Afghan businessmen to shift their transit of goods from Karachi harbour in Pakistan to Chabahar port in southern Iran.

<sup>24</sup> 'Official: Iran to Export 3mln litters of Gasoil to Afghanistan on Daily Basis', *FARS News Agency* (12 August 2011), <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9005210927>. Accessed on 12 August 2011.

<sup>25</sup> 'Iran ready to help Afghanistan control drug cultivation: Ahmadinejad', *Tehran Times* (21 July 2011), [http://old.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=244435](http://old.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=244435). Accessed on 1 August 2011.

<sup>26</sup> 'U.S.-Afghan strategic treaty will endanger Iran's interests: minister', *Tehran Times* (24 July 2011), [http://old.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=244580](http://old.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=244580). Accessed on 1 August 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Iran's support for Shia Iraqi insurgents (extensive training, funding and provision of advanced weapons) has been much greater than its support for the Taliban—hence the use of the term measured in describing Iran's level of support to the Taliban. Alireza Nader and Joya Laha, 'Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan', *RAND*,

has developed an asymmetrical capability to disrupt US operations or retaliate against American troops, should Iran's nuclear facilities be attacked.<sup>28</sup>

It remains a fact that a shared antipathy towards America is the only common ground between Shia Iran and the factions of the Taliban insurgency; on the other hand, President Karzai is regarded as the better long-term bet and applaud his increasingly anti-American stance.<sup>29</sup> Iran remains one of the most important donors and supporters of the Afghan government.

At the same time, Tehran's hostility towards the US has led to the cutting down of fuel supplies to Afghanistan in the cold months last year as it was argued that Kabul had siphoned the petrol and diesel to NATO forces. This move sparked an outcry in Kabul. The spectacle of hundreds of stranded fuel tankers at the border crossing of Islam Qala, in north-eastern Iran, recalls similar scenes last autumn along Pakistan's frontier with Afghanistan, when the Pakistanis blocked traffic in protest against American missile attacks on their territory.<sup>30</sup>

Iran's influence in the western province of Herat though pervasive is not always welcome among the locals.<sup>31</sup> However, Tehran feels that the US troop presence in Afghanistan, including the setting-up of a consulate and base in Herat, will prevent it from playing a larger role in a country with which it shares deep historical, cultural, civilisational and economic ties and considers it to be its 'sphere of influence'. Tehran further fears that the prolonged US stay in Afghanistan will negate the possibility of enhancing its influence permanently. To counter this, Tehran has attempted to entrench itself deep inside the Afghan body politics.

### **Creating a Pro-Iranian Constituency in Afghanistan**

Allegations have been rife of Iran permeating the power structures in Afghanistan. Money bags, political manoeuvring and covert aid are a few of the ways in which Tehran has

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Santa Monica, CA, 2011 [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional\\_papers/2011/RAND\\_OP322.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2011/RAND_OP322.pdf). Accessed on 10 August 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Mohsen Milani, Iran and Afghanistan, *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/iranprimer.usip.org/files/Iran%20and%20Afghanistan.pdf>. Accessed on 10 July 2011.

<sup>29</sup> 'Edgy neighbours: Relations between Afghanistan and Iran are not what they may seem', *The Economist* (27 January 2011), <http://www.economist.com/node/18014604>. Accessed on 1 August 2011.

<sup>30</sup> The Afghan government and the NATO forces insist that the petrol and diesel in question serve civilians only. But Iran points at the 'coincidence' that transshipments more than doubled in 2010, when America launched its surge against the Taliban.

<sup>31</sup> Author's discussions with locals in the western province of Herat in June 2007. Iranian influence in this region runs deep; the city of Herat served as the capital of the Persian empire in the early 15th century, and remained a centre of Iranian power and culture until it was taken by Dost Mohammed Khan in 1863 and made a de facto Afghan border state. Greg Bruno and Lionel Beehner, Iran and the Future of Afghanistan, Background, *Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC* (30 March 2009), <http://www.cfr.org/iran/iran-future-afghanistan/p13578>. Accessed on 14 May 2011.

attempted to cement and expand its relationship with Kabul. In October 2010, President Karzai's office admitted to receiving cash payments amounting to thousands of euros from Iran, year after year. The *New York Times* reported that, in August, Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan, Feda Hussein Maliki, gave a bag filled with euros to Karzai's chief of staff, Umar Daudzai, on Karzai's personal aircraft. The payment reportedly was intended to promote Iran's interests and to counter US and other western influence in Afghanistan<sup>32</sup> Such cash payments, for obvious reasons, have not gone down well with the US administration, prompting the State Department to declare that it was 'sceptical of Iran's motives' in Afghanistan. US officials feel that 'the bulging sacks of cash handed over to a top Karzai aide are only the tip of the iceberg'.<sup>33</sup>

Western diplomats and Afghan officials say far larger sums are regularly passed on to various groups and persons within Afghanistan in order to retain their sympathy towards Iran. Politically, the Islamic republic maintains close relationships with Afghanistan's Hazara and Tajik Shias and focuses on supporting Shia political parties, mobilising Shia mullahs and influencing the Afghan media.<sup>34</sup> A recent media report detailed Iranian influence in the city of Herat, where money made available by Tehran has created a special relationship between western Afghanistan and Iran. 'Iranian money builds roads and industrial parks; store-bought goods from soup to nuts are most likely to have Iranian provenance; and waves of Iranian cash buoy sparkling new mosques and opulent homes. Iranian power even takes the most literal form: Tehran helped build and pay for Herat's electrical grid. Many see pattern of Iranian sway that extends far beyond the border regions, permeating the heart of Afghanistan's power structure.'<sup>35</sup>

Fears of a pro-Iranian lobby playing an influential role in Afghan politics could turn out to be true. Close associates of President Karzai say that his inner circle, which belong with Hizb-e-Islami, is increasingly pushing him to move closer to Iran as the US forces recede. Hizb-e-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, has long served as a proxy for Iran. Not surprisingly, the Hizb-e-Islami has described establishment of permanent US military bases in Afghanistan as an 'eternal occupation'<sup>36</sup> of the country, toeing the Tehran line.

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<sup>32</sup> William McQuillen and Phil Mattingly, Iran Must Not Meddle in Afghanistan, U.S. Says After Bag of Cash Reported, *Bloomberg* (25 October 2010), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-10-24/iran-must-not-meddle-in-afghanistan-u-s-says-after-bag-of-cash-reported.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Laura King, 'In western Afghan city, Iran makes itself felt', *Los Angeles Times* (13 November 2010), <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/13/world/la-fg-afghanistan-iran-20101114>.

<sup>34</sup> Erin Fitzgerald, 'Iran's Shadow Diplomacy', *Huffington Post* (8 August 2011), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erin-fitzgerald/irans-shadow-diplomacy\\_b\\_920702.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erin-fitzgerald/irans-shadow-diplomacy_b_920702.html). Accessed on 10 August 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Laura King, 'In western Afghan city, Iran makes itself felt', *Los Angeles Times* (13 November 2010), <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/13/world/la-fg-afghanistan-iran-20101114>. Accessed on 1 August 2011.

<sup>36</sup> 'Talks on Details of US-Afghan Strategic Deal Ended', *Tolo News, Afghanistan* (19 July 2011), <http://tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/3409-talks-on-details-of-us-afghan-strategic-deal-ended>. Accessed on 20 July 2011.



In the 2010 parliamentary elections, Iran apparently provided monetary support to the Hazaras who have gained considerable prominence and clout in the Afghan political scene.<sup>37</sup> Of the 249 seats in the lower house, 50 went to the Hazaras, an outsized portion of power compared with their numbers. As many as 11 Hazara candidates swept the elections in Ghazni, winning all the seats in the Pashtun-majority province.<sup>38</sup> Pashtuns, the major ethnic group in Afghanistan, deprived of an opportunity to vote because of Taliban threats and poor security in the South, do not see the turn of events favourably. Iran's increasing influence on the Afghan political scene thus cannot be discounted, particularly when the attempts of reconciliation and negotiation towards the Taliban are gaining momentum.

Whether Karzai is willing to play to the tune of Iran is not known. However as his relations with the NATO alliance in general and the Obama Administration in particular have notably deteriorated during the last two years, he is not shy about using dealings with Iran to deliver an occasional sharp rebuke to the West. As an affront to the US allegations on issues of corruption and governance, Karzai invited Iranian President Ahmadinejad for a visit to the country in March 2010. Ahmadinejad duly obliged, coinciding his visit with the then US Defence Secretary Robert M. Gates's visit to Kabul. At a joint news conference with the Iranian president, Karzai stood by placidly as Ahmadinejad delivered a blistering anti-American tirade.<sup>39</sup>

In recent years, visits between the two countries have increased and politicians of both countries have participated in jointly organised forums. These forums have been used by the Iranians to vent their opposition against what they fear as the US ploy to stay longer in Afghanistan. For example, on 23 July 2011 Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar said at the meeting of the committee chairmen of the Iranian and Afghan parliaments in Tehran that such a strategic treaty will pose a threat to the interests of Iran and other regional countries.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Although Sunni Muslims constitute 80 per cent of Afghanistan's population, the country does have a sizeable Shia minority of 19 per cent. The Hazaras, a Persian-speaking ethnic group which is concentrated mainly in central Afghanistan, with major communities present in western Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, constitute a large portion of Afghanistan's Shia. They make up roughly 9 per cent of Afghanistan's population or 2.9 million people.

<sup>38</sup> In Ghazni, where Pashtun-majority districts such as Andar were chaotic and cowed on election day, Hazara districts such as Jaghori were calm and orderly, allowing mass voter participation. Pamela Constable, 'Afghanistan's Hazaras gain clout in disputed parliamentary elections', *Washington Post* (24 December 2010), [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/23/AR\\_2010122304577.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/23/AR_2010122304577.html). Accessed on 17 August 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Laura King, 'In western Afghan city, Iran makes itself felt', *Los Angeles Times* (13 November 2010), <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/13/world/la-fg-afghanistan-iran-20101114>. Accessed on 13 July 2011.

<sup>40</sup> 'U.S.-Afghan strategic treaty will endanger Iran's interests: minister', *Tehran Times* (24 July 2011), [http://old.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=244580](http://old.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=244580). Accessed on 13 August 2011.

## **Iran-Pakistan Alliance: An Enemy's Enemy is a Friend?**

Apart from initiating its unilateral initiatives within Afghanistan, Iran has been making common cause with Pakistan as well. Both countries suggest the regional powers need to have a stake in the solution to the Afghan problem and a solution imposed by either international military efforts would not produce enduring results.

Pakistan too has responded to the gestures from Iran. It has improved relations with Tehran in recent times and has claimed to have helped Tehran with the arrest of Abdolmalek Rigi, leader of the Baloch Sunni rebel group Jundullah. Rigi was captured in February 2010 and was hanged in Iran in June that year. Both countries have tried to overcome the hurdles posed by Pakistan's close ties to Iran's main rival Saudi Arabia.

With the US administration sidelining Pakistan for lack of effective cooperation on counter-terrorism, the latter is seen to be making common cause with Iran. The participation by Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari in the two-day conference on terrorism held at Tehran on 25 June 2011 was invested with political symbolism as a mark of displeasure towards the US. Zardari returned to Tehran within three weeks on a second visit carrying the stamp of Pakistan's strategic defiance of the US. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei received Zardari on both occasions, signifying the high importance that Tehran attaches to the nascent signs of shift in Pakistan's regional policies.

Tehran and Islamabad have often been at loggerheads regarding their Afghanistan policies in the past. They could assume similar roles if they don't reach an agreement on the limits of their genuine interests in the war-affected nation. Till now, Iran and Pakistan have been supporting different Afghan armed groups in the country's conflict. Iran primarily backed the Shia factions and the non-Pashtun groups during the Afghan jihad against the Soviets, while Pakistan provided sanctuary to the mostly Sunni and Pashtun-based parties. Pakistan has, however, also strived to be on friendly terms with the Shia groups, and the Hezb-i-Wahdat leader Karim Khalili, now Afghanistan's vice-president, shifted to Peshawar during the jihad days to escape Iran's suffocating embrace in Tehran.<sup>41</sup>

## **Drawdown and Beyond**

It has become imperative on the part of President Karzai to play a delicate balancing game in the evolving great power relations and prevailing uncertainties arising from the transition process beyond 2014. In rejecting the first draft of the strategic partnership agreement with

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<sup>41</sup> Rahimullah Yusufzai, 'Influencing Afghanistan: Neighbours and Faraway States Jostle for Position', *Newsline* (13 August 2011), <http://www.newslinemagazine.com/2011/08/influencing-afghanistan-neighbours-and-faraway-states-jostle-for-position/>. Accessed on 14 August 2011.

the US in its entirety, Karzai appeased domestic opposition as well as regional concerns.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Afghan officials see the enduring American presence and broader strategic relationship as essential, in part to protect Afghanistan from the onslaughts of the insurgency as well as meddling neighbours. It is in the interest of Afghanistan's security that the US retains its presence there, even with a reduced strength than at present.

However, to be effective in its assumed role of protector of Afghanistan's security, the US would have to envision a common platform with Iran to stay beyond 2014. A hostile Iran with an empowering effect on the Taliban insurgency can create more trouble than anticipated. A regional dialogue, in which all the regional powers make a commitment to play a stabilising role in Afghanistan, would be most appropriate way out from the present conundrum. For that to succeed, improved US-Iran relations would remain critical.

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<sup>42</sup> Jason Burke, 'Secret US and Afghanistan talks could see troops stay for decades', *The Guardian* (13 June 2011), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/13/us-afghanistan-secret-talks-on-security-partnership>. Accessed on 14 June 2011.