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Iran and the US vie in Afghanistan

By Brian M Downing
6/8/2012

Iran over the past decade has devoted considerable attention to getting American forces away from its borders. In Iraq, it backed Shi'ite militias who formed an important part of the insurgency. It later pressed Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to oust US forces, though he did allow US training missions and oil companies to remain.

Efforts to oust the US from Afghanistan have been unsuccessful. Iran arms the Taliban with a modicum of weapons, mainly as a reminder to the US that these supplies could increase sharply in the event of attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. Iran loathes the Taliban as an unstable Sunni cult that is backed, albeit indirectly, by Saudi Arabia.

The recent US-Afghan strategic partnership, which calls for a US presence for another 12 years, was very much opposed in Tehran. It is still trying to use its influence with northern Afghan peoples to reject the agreement in parliament. This is unlikely to be successful but Iran has another, more long-term way to counter US interests in the region.

Upset by the US-Afghan strategic agreement, Iran has threatened to expel from its territory tens of thousands of Afghan refugees, many of whom have been there since the Russian war in the 1980s. This will not have much effect and it likely reflects the wrath of the politically-ascendant Revolutionary Guard Corps rather than a cautious plan from other parts of the Iranian state.

More importantly, however, Iran is using its extensive influence with the non-Pashtun peoples of the north. They are a majority of the country's population and over-represented in the national assembly, owing to low Pashtun voter turnout in the war-torn south and east.

These northerners respect Iran. Their language and culture are Persian-influenced; Iran backed them during the Russian war and against the Taliban; and Iran is helping with development programs in the western part of the country, especially with roads connecting the two countries' commerce, a point to be looked at presently. Further, Iranian emissaries are known to deliver handsome sums of money to President Ahmed Karzai - a man who is known to have buoyant collegiality with such emissaries and keen respect for their interests.

These ties and collegial feelings, however, are unlikely to prod the national assembly to reject the US-Afghan partnership. Iran is an international pariah; the US has a great deal of international influence, including some with India - another favorite of northern Afghans. Further, the US has demonstrated resolve in fighting the Taliban, training the northern-dominated army, and bringing about at least preliminary negotiations with insurgents. Northerners will not push the US out as its departure could bring civil war and perhaps even a Taliban return.

Iran has two policies that are within its reach. First, it can convince Karzai to forbid the use of Afghan bases to attack Iranian bases, to conduct reconnaissance missions over Iran, and to launch guerrilla operations into Iran. Second and far more importantly, Iran can use its proximity to capitalize on Afghan economic development in a manner that will upset US policy to isolate and stifle Iran.

A Soviet geological survey in the 1970s showed promising geological deposits in many parts of Afghanistan. As is now well known, a more recent American survey confirmed the Soviet findings: Afghanistan is rich in copper, iron, semi-precious gems, and rare earths. North-central Afghanistan may even have appreciable oil deposits and collegial Chinese emissaries have won exploration rights there. With global commodity prices on the rise, Afghanistan is poised to prosper. It needs a settlement with the Taliban - and reliable export routes.

The most obvious route is south into Pakistan then down to its capacious port facilities in Karachi and Gwadar. China built the latter and is building a railroad line from northern Afghanistan to the Khyber Pass. Roads and ports are in place or soon will be, but doubts fall upon Pakistan. It is rent by sectarian and ethnic strife, plagued by inept and corrupt government, and may face a fiscal crisis of Athenian proportions in a year or so. The roads from Afghanistan to Gwadar pass through Balochistan province, which has a problematic insurgency. China must wonder if its convoys coming out of Afghanistan will one day face the same arbitrary closures and fees that the American traffic going into Afghanistan had to face until it turned to the northern route.

This northern supply line would be another export route but it is long and has no waterborne routes until the truck and rail traffic reaches the Black and Baltic Seas. The route is more reliable than the Pakistani route but it is of course more expensive. The US/ISAF convoys may be paving the way, so to speak, for a northern export route for Afghan resources.

Iran can offer Karzai a third route - one more reliable than the Pakistani route and less expensive than the northern route. Afghan ores can be transported west into Iran then south to the ports of

Chabahar and Bandar-e-Abbas. Iran will benefit from jobs and transit fees and also from limiting US access into Afghanistan.

Iranian routes may enjoy support from two of the main business developers in Afghanistan - India and China, which though geopolitical rivals, have reasonably cooperative arrangements elsewhere in South Asia and have collegially secured mining rights from Karzai. Both powers are on good terms with Iran, which supplies them with considerable amounts of hydrocarbons. Neither India nor China is supportive of the US effort to boycott Iranian oil. China is eager to solidify ties with a key oil supplier and India wishes the same and also to consolidate near Central Asian markets.

The US will of course press Karzai to snub Iranian plans to use its ports, sensible though it seems to neutral observers. Karzai will be eager to have more than one export route for his resources and he will likely see Pakistan much as everyone else now is - unstable and unreliable. Further, he will see Pakistan, or at least its army and its Haqqani network client, as responsible for a recent wave of bombings and assassinations in Kabul, which likely shaped his decision to ink the partnership with the US.

To some extent Iran shares Karzai's dim view of Pakistan. Tehran has correct ties with Islamabad but sees it as supportive of the Taliban and other anti-Shi'ite groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Iran objects to Pakistani troops and mercenaries serving in Saudi Arabia, sometimes in the cause of repressing Shi'ites, and sees Pakistan as moving closer to the Saudis as the former seeks financial help and the latter may be seeking nuclear technology one day.