

# Iran's Changed Perception Concerning its Role in Afghanistan Following Soviet Disintegration

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## Abstract

*Afghanistan is situated in a geopolitically sensitive region. Following Soviet disintegration, Afghanistan became a gateway to the resource-rich independent states of Central Asia. The Taliban was propped up in Afghanistan by Pakistan to allow it to gain access to the natural resources of Central Asia. Iran's concerns in Afghanistan also witnessed changes. During the Taliban's rise to power, there was more to the strategic thinking in Iran's foreign policy making than merely the immediate concerns regarding the issues of the spread of drugs and the need to deter ethnic cleansing by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Iran's opposition to the Taliban and Pakistan's role in Afghanistan also constituted an indirect opposition to the greater American role in the region. While up to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran's interest was confined to the Gulf and was restricted to enhancing its influence in Afghanistan where large number of Shia Muslims lived, Iran took advantage of the disintegration of the Soviet Union to expand its interests and widened its role considerably to incorporate a growing interest in Central Asia and expressed its intention of using Afghanistan as a corridor to Central Asia. Iran also demonstrated a growing interest in South Asia as it emerged as a new market for Central Asian resources. Iran's changed perception about its interests and role shaped its foreign policy after 9/11.*

**Key words:** *Geopolitics, Containment, Hegemony, Regional power, Strategy, Natural resources*

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## Introduction

Afghanistan's geostrategic location has attracted regional and extra-regional powers alike. For many powers, it not only serves as a bridge to Central Asia, but also links the Eurasian landmass with the Indian Ocean and thereby contributes to multi-dimensional strategies-both naval and continental. Iran's interests and its role in Afghanistan changed with the change of the geopolitical scenario in the aftermath of Soviet disintegration. Iran wanted greater connectivity between the West Asian and Central Asian regions and aspired to be a strong regional power following the decline of Iraq's position of power. However, Iran's endeavor in this regard has been curtailed by the American hegemonic ambition in the region which not only aims at undercutting Iranian influence but also seeks to promote its own influence vigorously. I have argued in this paper that Iran's interest in Afghanistan is a reflection of its larger interest in the entire region spanning West Asia, Central Asia and Afghanistan. Secondly, the competing geopolitical roles played by the US and Iran in the wider region finds similar reflections in Afghanistan given its geostrategic location.

Iran's aspiration to play a major role in the regions of West Asia, Central Asia, as well as in Afghanistan was more of a geopolitical necessity than anything else. Iran's interests were, to a large extent, shaped by the military and economic opportunities that the region provided to other major powers. The US, as an extra-regional power wanted to exert control over the region's resources and their supply for geopolitical reasons rather than satisfy its own consumption needs. The importance of energy resources lies in operating the military for more expansionist purposes, sustaining the alliance system by providing natural resources to the allies. For example, the US always wanted to secure the supply of energy to its West European allies and Japan and direct the foreign policies of different states by denying such energy resources by exercising control over their production and supply (Mercille, 2009). It is argued that in the first Gulf War, the US did not intervene to secure an oil supply from Middle East for its own consumption. The US imports little of it. It intervened to keep this supply in friendly hands and maintain its strategy of "divide and conquer" by dividing the control of the Gulf's oil among several rulers to prevent the emergence of strong regional powers in the region. The US depends on geographically closer and more reliable sources located in the traditional American "backyard" and imports almost fifty per cent of oil from Canada and Latin American countries (Mercille, 2009).

Similarly, Iran is a resource-rich country. Its interest in providing pipelines for the supply of Central Asian energy resources has the long-term objective of enabling it to become a regional power rather than merely profiting from the transit fees. According to Oystein Noreng, besides transit fees, by facilitating oil and gas transit, Iran would be in a better position to develop trade with the Central Asian region. Central Asia could eventually become an important market for Iranian manufactured goods. In turn, the combination of oil and gas transit and trade could establish Iran as regional power in Central Asia. With oil transiting from Central Asia to Iranian Gulf ports, Iran would strengthen its position in the Gulf, essentially in relation to Saudi-Arabia, but potentially also in relation to Iraq (Noreng, 2009). Thus increase of Iran's influence in Central Asia would also reinforce its strengthened position in relation to its Gulf neighbours.

### **Geopolitics and Iran**

The disintegration of the USSR and emergence of the independent Central Asian Republics brought forth long term considerations for the major powers to chalk out plans to lay down trade routes and pipelines to transfer energy resources from these states and outbid other contending powers. The fact that the three countries which share the majority of the region's energy and resources, namely Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, are landlocked makes them depend on their immediate neighbours for access to Western markets. In the aftermath of the collapse of communism, the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia, in particular Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, have been trying to exploit their natural resources as they consider oil to be the prime means of securing their economic and political independence. According to the estimates of geologists, the oil deposits of the Caspian Sea may not be quantitatively comparable to the deposits of the Persian Gulf, but they are still considered of excellent quality and able to provide a significant alternative source of energy in the 21st century. In particular, it is estimated that the entire Caspian Sea is a basin full of oil and natural gas, starting from Azerbaijan and continuing to the opposite shore on the territory of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. These deposits carry enormous importance because of the expected exhaustion of the deposits of Alaska and the North Sea by the year 2015. According to a Congressional Research Service report "in the Caspian region, the prospective increase in proven natural gas reserves

appears to be much smaller in relative terms than for oil, but still very large. It is estimated that there are nearly 300tcf in additional natural gas reserves in the region. Should this be the case, the proven reserves of the total Caspian region in the near future would put the region's proven gas reserve total at more than twice its present level and far exceed present Saudi Arabian natural gas reserves" (Gelb, 2006).

Iran, apart from the export of its own oil, strives to provide routes for the transfer Central Asian energy resources. The concern for the investors, oil-producing countries and oil-consuming countries is finding out the shortest, cheapest and safest exit routes for the transfer of energy resources from the landlocked Central Asian Republics. But these are the principles of the market economy. Powerful states also play a geopolitical role by excluding certain other states from the leverage of providing supply routes though routes that are thought to be the most convenient ones on the basis of market principles.

Russia controls most of the pipeline system built during the Soviet Union so as to supply the Central Asian energy resources to the European market (Gelb, 2006). The Central Asian states are in the look out for their independent identities do not appreciate the Russian monopoly over the supply routes and therefore want to diversify their supplies to various markets through numerous supply routes. According to most independent energy experts as well as the Western oil companies, Iran provides the shortest and cheapest route to the Gulf and to the South Asian markets. From a purely practical point of view this is the most sensible option as within the shortest distance possible, the Central Asian states are able to 'plug into' the already existing Iranian pipeline system. Therefore, the countries of the Caspian Sea region turned their attention towards Iran as a future exit route. However, from a geopolitical perspective, the US role in the Central Asian states has been to limit the influence of Russia in the north and Iran in the south by providing an alternative pipeline system. The US granted official invitations to the presidents of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. And all visited Washington so as to hear about US preferred route: the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route in Turkey and the other from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan. Both routes were planned to bypass Iran and Russia. The US administration had exerted pressure on oil companies to accept the project. The pipeline using the Baku- Tbilisi-Ceyhan route was estimated to cost nearly four billion dollars. The financial companies objected to the costs and would not have shouldered the burden had the US and Turkish government not paid part of it (Tarock, 1999).

Similarly, though the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia apparently shared a common economic objective in the construction of the pipeline joining Turkmenistan and Pakistan through Afghanistan with the US oil company Unocol and Saudi Arabian company Delta Oil as the main financiers of the project, this was deemed a commercially non-viable project. This project involved the risk of insecurity as the pipeline was to pass through an unstable Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unocol Vice President, Marty Miller declared that the project at that moment was not financeable. Despite the commercial non-viability of the pipeline projects such as the TAP and the pipeline through Turkey, they were given utmost importance by the governments of the US and Saudi Arabia in the case of the TAP and the US and Turkey in case of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan. Williams and others argue that the US went to the extent of invading and destroying Iraqi oil resources to shoot up the price of oil to give effect to its financially nonviable projects. According to Paul A. Williams and others (2008: 383) “the prolonged damage to Iraq’s oil infrastructure under the occupation and the effects of disrepair and sabotage helped to cause the price of oil to skyrocket and make the projects viable. The projects aimed at the containment of Iran more than breaking Russian control over the Caucasus transport corridor”.

They argue that “these accomplishments seem remarkable in light of the fact that the seminal BTC pipeline was nearly shelved after the price collapse in 1998 and the downgrading of Azerbaijan’s offshore oil-reserve estimates. Initial US support for BTC was primarily political rather than financial. Despite favorable rhetoric from members of the Clinton Administration, the American government remained largely noncommittal towards funding the BTC, even as a means of breaking Russian control over the Caucasus transport corridor. Rather, Washington did more to back the project by maintaining its ban on the building of new pipelines from and through Iran. The occupation of Iraq inadvertently imparted a new momentum to Caspian projects like the BTC and BTE by helping to ratchet up world energy prices. The aforementioned conditions also elicited Turkey’s interest in completing these projects” (Williams, Tekin, Ali, 2008). The plan for the TAP pipeline project was, however, shelved after the Taliban turned away from the US orbit of influence.

Iran not only wants to transit the Central Asian energy resources to the Gulf, it also harbours plans to reach out to the South Asian market. The TAP project, unlike other pipeline projects, can be seen as a strategy of

the US to deny Iran the South Asian market. If the TAP pipeline system is successfully laid down, it will deprive Iran of transit fees from the supply of energy resources to the South Asian market and Iran will lose the South Asian markets for the sale of its own energy resources. Iran is also an exporter of oil and gas, and finally will be bereft of potential political and trade influence in South Asia. Iran has shown interest in the idea of Asian Common Market and thus developed healthy relationships with China. China in turn treats Iran as a regional power and as a counterweight to Russian's control over the energy resources in Central Asia. Iran's increased interests in forging new links with China can be interpreted as its attempt to break the US's containment policy in the region. The US has experienced divergences with Iran from the nuclear issue to allow the latter to play a dominant role in the region. The US's pipeline project of laying down the western - Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route and the south eastern - Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan route as an alternative to the southern route provided by Iran is a move to deprive Iran of playing the role of a regional power. Iran views the policy of the US in the region as one of encirclement using allies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Pakistan. Some analysts argue that Tehran's support of Afghan renegade warlord, Ismail Khan in Herat is part of its plan to prevent the Afghan pipeline project and protect Iran's influence in the global oil market (Kemp, 2002). Iran's opposition to the Taliban can be viewed from this angle.

Since the Taliban started its military campaign in 1994, the US had provided indications of positive support to the campaign. The US officials on different occasions had expressed that "they saw nothing objectionable about the version of Islamic law the Taliban have imposed in the areas under their control. The Taliban should be 'acknowledged' as an 'indigenous' movement which has 'demonstrated staying power', and that when 'you get to know them you find they really have a great sense of humour'" (Tarock, 1999).

Before Taliban captured Herat, Islamabad welcomed Iran's participation in a pipeline project. In order to accommodate the Iranian interest in Afghanistan, Pakistan declared that it would facilitate the Iranian pipeline to pass through its territory to India. Taliban's capture of Herat prompted Unocol and Delta oil to finalise a deal with Turkmenistan for a pipeline to Pakistan through Afghanistan. Tehran's limited influence in Afghanistan through Herat ended with the Taliban's capture of that area. Herat is situated at the crossroad of competing Turkic and Persian

empires. It is the cradle of Afghanistan's history and civilization and has enjoyed historic ties to Persia and the Silk Road trade routes. Iran shares a 400-mile border with Western Afghanistan and it has always felt a sense of possession towards Herat. The project for an alternative route through Afghanistan to Pakistan could be seen as a strategy developed by the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to deprive Iran of playing the role of a regional power after the latter lost its influence in western Afghanistan.

Apart from the oil politics, the US-Iran relationship and their respective roles in the region was also shaped by pure strategic considerations. The Rimland countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan etc. provide opportunities to develop multidimensional military strategies to states to become powerful and establish hegemony in the region. These are the regions which link the Eurasian Heartland with the Indian Ocean. Controlling these regions would mean development of both continental and maritime strategies at the same time. Davutoglu (1998: 9) argues "therefore the undeclared cooperation of the US and the USSR against Iran during the Iran-Iraq war and the declared coalition against Iraq in the Gulf War is not surprising. Both the super powers militarily supported Iraq to prevent Iran from consolidating the Rimland through a wave of revolutions. Then they co-operatively destroyed Iraqi military capacity which had provided Iraq with a superior strategic position from the geopolitical perspective at the core of the Rimland".

### **Iran and Afghanistan after 9/11**

Before 9/11, there was occasional cooperation between Iran and the US during the Afghan Civil War. Iran, along with the United States, Russia, and the countries bordering Afghanistan, attended U.N.-sponsored meetings in New York (the Six Plus Two group) to try to end the internal conflict in Afghanistan. Iran and the United States also participated in a U.N.-sponsored group in Geneva, which included Italy and Germany (Katzman, 2003).

Post-9/11 period also witnessed a short term cooperative relationship between the US and Iran in addressing the problem of Afghanistan. As per the Iranian diplomatic sources, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps cooperated with the CIA and the US Special Operations Forces in supplying and funding the commanders of the Northern Alliance. The Cyprus Group favored by the Iranian government participated in the

negotiations in Bonn, Germany, to initiate a peace process in the war-torn country (Rubin and Batmanglich, 2008).

Since the United States partly depended on Tehran's good will for stabilizing and establishing a new order in Afghanistan, both sides entered into a tacit agreement on limited cooperation, first and foremost because of similar interests. Both Washington and Tehran had an interest in peace and stability after decades of war in Afghanistan, though motivated by different factors. It is argued that while for the US, the major priority was quick success in the war against terrorism; the Iranian government was driven by the prospect of pursuing its plans for regional cooperation facilitated by increased stability on its eastern border and a new Afghan government favorably disposed to Iran.

In Afghanistan, US and Iranian interests converged on the issue of stemming the trade in narcotics. Afghanistan is one of the world's largest producers of illegal drugs, including over 90% of the world's opium, 80% of which will flow either through Iran or Pakistan. According to the State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2006 Strategy Report, "There is overwhelming evidence of Iran's strong commitment to keep drugs leaving Afghanistan from reaching its citizens." (The CNA corporation, 2006). Reportedly, thousands of Iran's law enforcement personnel were killed policing the Afghan border in an attempt to stem the flow of narcotics from that country. According to Robert Finn, the US ambassador to Afghanistan, this problem common to both the countries provided the basis for long-term cooperation between the US and Iran (The CNA corporation, 2006).

The terrorist attack on the twin towers in the US suspended American containment policy towards Iran for a while. The US 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 (The CNA corporation, 2006).

In addition to an increase in Iranian common interests, and US, a change of regime in Iran also played an important role in moderating the stance of both the powers. In 1997, Mohammed Khatami came to power with his reform program. He granted freedom to the press, eased social restrictions, and brought limited degree of accountability to government. Khatami announced in a 1998 interview on CNN that he wanted to start breaking down "the wall of mistrust" that separated Iran from the United States. In response to this declaration, the US policy makers began to moderate their views towards the Islamic Republic (Talwar, 2001).



Iran's influence was instrumental in the establishment of the Karzai government. The Northern Alliance, dominated by Tajik commanders with close ties to Iran, was reluctant to share power with Hamid Karzai, a prominent Pashtun tribal leader. Iranian political pressure on Northern Alliance leaders during negotiations in Bonn, persuaded them to reach a compromise and agree to the formation of the new government. Iran also played an active role in Afghanistan's reconstruction as from 2001. Iran initially pledged \$570 million in 2002. At the Conference on Afghan Reconstruction held in February 2006, Iran pledged an additional \$100 million in aid, making it one of the largest donor states since 2001.

The cooperation between the US and Iran initially seen after 9/11 could not be sustained any longer. This sabotaged peace and political developments in Afghanistan. The basis of the growing divergence of interests between Iran and the US has to be found in geopolitics.

### **The US policy of containment and Iran's bid for regional supremacy**

Neither 9/11 nor regime change, however, completely changed the US policy towards Iran and Iran's perspective on the American role in its neighbourhood. Mutual suspicions were deep in terms of their pursuit of geopolitical interests in the region. While Iran always aspired to become a regional power, the US wanted to establish its hegemony in the region to serve its long term geopolitical interests. Even the moderate political leader Khatami of Iran had "always taken extreme care to portray his reforms as consistent with the ideals of the revolution and Iran's constitutional order" (Talwar, 2001). Geoffrey Kemp (2002) observes that while prior to 9/11 Iran was extremely concerned over the political situation in Afghanistan and drug smuggling from Afghanistan to Iran, in the post-9/11 era, its priorities have changed. Iran now grapples with the issues of how to deal with US operations in Afghanistan and the changing geopolitical dynamics throughout Eurasia.

Before the 9/11, Iran was worried about the American geopolitical objectives in Central Asia that the US was pursuing through the Taliban. 9/11, however, brought America to its doorstep. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US has entered the Eurasian Heartland by establishing military bases in Central Asian states including Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It is not only vital to develop continental strategies but it is also situated on the border of Iran. The US military bases in Rimland states such as

Pakistan and Afghanistan and in the Heartland led to an Iranian fear of encirclement as the former could operate both from the sea and from the Eurasian continent. Iran feared the US troop presence near its borders when a 300-hectare airbase was being built by the US in the desert area of Holang in Ghorian district of Herat province, situated only 45 kilometres away from the Iranian frontier. According to the US military and Afghan government, the base was built for the Afghan National Army. However, some experts argue that the base would put Iran's entire air space under American domination. Moreover, since 2004, the Shindand airbase in the same Herat province was renovated and tripled in size to become the second largest military airbase in Afghanistan next to that of Bagram. Iran wants to play an important role in the region by controlling the economically and militarily sensitive areas while the role of the US in the Middle East, Central Asia and Southwest Asia and that of Russia in the Central Asian region in the aftermath of the disintegration of the USSR has been to deny such a role to Iran.

To contain Iran, the American President George Bush included Iran in the "Axis of Evil" in his January 2002 State of the Union speech (Katzman, 2010). He also named Pakistan as the US's closest non-NATO ally. This occurred at the same time as Iran was cooperating with the US in the aftermath of 9/11. Later, President Barack Obama declared that "his Administration shares the goals of previous Administrations to contain Iran's strategic capabilities and regional influence. The Administration has not changed the previous Administration's characterization of Iran as a "profound threat to U.S. national security interests," a perception generated not only by Iran's nuclear program but also by its military assistance to armed groups in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the Palestinian group Hamas, and to Lebanese Hezbollah" (Katzman, 2010).

The Atlantic Council of the US report titled 'Needed: A comprehensive US Policy Towards Pakistan' released in February 2009 recommended to the Obama administration to include Saudi Arabia in its fight against terrorism within Pakistan (Goswami, 2009). While Saudi Arabia has the dubious record of funding the most radical *madrassas* in Pakistan, the engagement of Iran, given its geographical proximity with both Pakistan and Afghanistan, would have been a better choice. Later, the blueprint of Af-Pak strategy included Iran with its emphasis on regional cooperation but at the London Conference, regional approach was discarded in favour of a coalition approach involving Islamic nations. This coalition included Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and a handful of Central Asian

Republics bordering Afghanistan. Inclusion of Saudi Arabia seems to be intended to minimise the influence of Iran in seeking a solution to the Afghan problem. Furthermore, the plan to include the moderate Taliban in the governance process is yet another attempt to contain Iran in the region. The US seeks to isolate Iran by increasing sanctions against Iran on the nuclear issue and providing support for regime change as part of wider democratisation initiatives. Instead of promoting and strengthening current democratic trends within Iran, the U.S. favours enforcement strategies that offer support to the opposition to the regime. In the US budget 2010, \$67 million was appropriated for the promotion of democracy in Iran (\$19.6 million through DRL and \$48.6 million through the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs/USAID) (Congressional Research Service, 2010). The US currently lends support to the democratic movements in the Arabic states under the rubric of “Arab Spring” to promote its geopolitical interests which threaten Iran’s national interests. For example, it is argued that the US would welcome any movement claiming to be democratic to topple the Assad regime in Syria to break the Iran-Syria alliance even if the end result might be a fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood government (Gharekhan, 2011).

Moreover, arms sales to Gulf States such as Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, within the framework of the Gulf Security Dialogue, are part of the containment strategy of the US (Katzman, 2010: 46). For example, under President Obama, the Department of Defense has announced arms sales to these states totaling more than \$4 billion (Knapp, 2010). Though Obama sought pragmatic engagement with Iran on regional issues like Iraq and Afghanistan, the policies of containment contradict such initiatives.

At the 46th Munich Security Conference in the month of February 2010, “both the US National Security Adviser and the NATO Secretary-General advocated for the extension of NATO’s field of action. The integration of members of the Gulf Cooperation Council in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and arms sales by the US to the Gulf states within the framework of Gulf Security Dialogue on the West and the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict in the East place NATO in a position to encircle Iran” (Rozoff, 2010). There is an intensification of military contacts, visits and joint activities between NATO and the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which parallel the intensification of the U.S. buildup in the region and is conducted within the framework of the

Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) launched in 2004.

The US policy of containing Iran in the Gulf region in the west and relying more on Pakistan in the east define their respective roles in Afghanistan. So far the US continues with its policy of containment towards Iran by limiting their cooperation in Afghanistan. The differences on a host of areas encompassing nuclear issues and regional issues including Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine revolve around the core issue of Iran's aspiration to be a regional power and the US's search for hegemony in the region.

The US-Iranian bilateral relationship with regard to Afghanistan has not witnessed any improvements in recent years. 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. Tehran has refuted these charges. 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 (D' Souza, 2011). Senior NATO commanders have warned repeatedly that Iran is supplying the insurgency with weapons, money and even providing training at camps on the Iranian side of the border.

The Iranian government, on the other hand, charges the US with 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. 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. Iran's aid to Afghan insurgents can be viewed as countering the perceived U.S. support of Jundullah, and increasing evidence of Iran's support to various Afghan insurgent groups that could be directly tied to the ongoing insurgency in Iran's Baluchistan territory. Indeed, heightened Iranian concern over the Baluchi insurgency could result in even more-sophisticated Iranian aid being delivered to Afghan insurgent groups fighting U.S. forces. This aid could materialize in spite of Iran's traditional enmity with the Taliban. It is argued that potential

U.S. or Israeli military actions against Iran's nuclear facilities could result in more-significant Iranian aid to the Taliban (Nader and Laha, 2011).

The New York Times reported that, in August 2010, Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan, Feda Hussein Maliki, handed over 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 (McQuillen and Mattingly, 2010). It is argued that in the 2010 parliamentary elections, Iran apparently provided monetary support to the Hazaras who have gained considerable prominence and clout on the Afghan political scene. Of the 249 seats in the lower house, 50 went to the Hazaras. They won disproportionately far more seats in relation to their population. As many as 11 Hazara candidates swept the elections in Ghazni and won all the seats in the Pashtun majority province. All these occurrences have made the US more suspicious of Iran's role in Afghanistan. To add to American suspicions, Iran did not spend much time in tightening its relationship with the Afghan regime as differences grew between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the US.

### **Iran's Strategies as a Regional Power**

Iran developed close ties with Russia, India and China to promote its interests in the militarily and economically sensitive region spanning Afghanistan, West Asia and Central Asia. The Iranian project of Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline does not hamper the Russian interests of maintaining its monopoly over the northern routes to supply energy resources from Central Asia to the West European markets. Moreover, the collusion in the interests of both the countries to deny opportunities to the US to establish hegemony over the region and to open the North-South Corridor aimed at connecting Russian and Indian ports via Iran, have brought them closer (Afrasiabi and Maleki, 2003). Cooperating at the military and strategic level, Russia planned to transfer the S-300 missile defence system to Iran and used Belarus as a conduit for selling the SA-20 missile system to it (Bhadrakumar, 2011). Iran and India cooperated on some important issues. They cooperated in laying down an alternative route to Central Asia through Afghanistan. There were also increased instances of consultations between India and Iran on the issue of Taliban reconciliation. However, India's opposition to Iran's nuclear programme at the UN and its inability

to push the IPI pipeline project under pressure from the US has hampered the Iran-India bilateral relationship. The bilateral relationship also depends on India's role in the western-sponsored democratic movements in the Middle East. China's dependence on Iran for energy resources and its interest in not allowing the US military presence in its neighbourhood in the Central Asian region has brought Iran and China closer. They also shared views regarding the proposal of inclusion of the moderate Taliban in the governance structure of Afghanistan at the London conference, January 2010. They maintain that such a distinction would not decrease the menace of the Taliban rather than to institutionalize it. Apart from for religious reasons, Iran fears that the US might revive its plan for the TAP pipeline project by reconciling with the Taliban.

However, Iran has also its independent strategies to contain the influence of major powers in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. While Russia, in the post-Cold War era, wants to see the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) as the basis of regional order, China looks at the Shanghai Regional Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as the basis of regional order and Iran is interested in seeing alternative forms of regional groupings to lessen the roles of China and Russia in Central Asia. The treaty of the Persian Speaking Union between Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan exemplifies Iranian interests to play the role of a major regional power by linking itself and Central Asia with the alternative regional groupings.

Iran, despite severe international sanctions and the US attempts to contain it, aspires to be a major player in the region and develop different strategies to fulfill its aspirations. This geopolitical battle is fought in Afghanistan in view of its geographical proximity to the Central Asian states to its north and Iran to its west, on account of its potential to provide a pipeline route to link South Asian states and offers justification for the long-term military presence of the US in and around it.

To prevent a strong US military presence in Afghanistan, Iran has urged the UN to take a prominent role in shaping the country's political system. But the US, so as to make Iran's attempts to win support for its proposals less effective, has accused Iran of sabotaging the peace process by supplying sophisticated arms to the Taliban in western Afghanistan and shepherding fleeing members of the defeated Taliban and Al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan through Iran. There are arguments that though some evidence of Iranian weapons in Afghanistan has been discovered, it is unclear as to whether the Iranian government is formally involved or the weapons have

been smuggled in by third parties and rogue elements within Iran. Some analysts put forth the argument that Iran pursues a policy of “managed instability” in Afghanistan to bog down the US forces there although it does not wish the Taliban to capture power once again. According to Michael Rubin (2007: 13) “for Iran, influence in Afghanistan appears to be a zero-sum game. While the Iranian government welcomed the Taliban’s fall, they were less than sanguine about the actions of Washington in precipitating it. While Iranian and American diplomats cooperated to form a post-Taliban political order, many Iranian actions run counter to their own commitments and declarations of cooperation. Iranian security services did not adhere to the promises of Iranian diplomats to engage their Western counterparts”.

It is argued that Iran supports its proxies like Hezbollah, a militant organisation, in Afghanistan while seeking to monopolise the net of social services. For example, after the fall of the Taliban, Iran dispatched Hasan Kazemi Qomi, a Revolutionary Guard commander who served as the Iranian regime’s chief liaison to Hezbollah in Lebanon, as its chief diplomat to Herat. Barnett argues that “while the Iranian government contributed personnel to the construction effort, they used the dispatch of such volunteers to provide cover for Revolutionary Guardsmen and intelligence operatives. On March 8, 2002, Afghan commanders intercepted 12 Iranian agents and proxies who were organizing armed resistance among Afghan commanders” (Rubin, 2007).

Iran’s aspiration to become a regional power is reflected in its attempt to become a nuclear power despite international sanctions, in its massive support for non-state militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah in terms of finance and arms, its seeking of support from Islamic countries against the occupation of Palestine by Israel and in its continued role in strengthening Shiite groups in the neighbouring countries where they form a minority. Supporting Sunni groups like Hamas has compensated for its policy of promoting the interests of only Shiite groups. In Lebanon, the Sunni group of Hamas was granted shelter and protection by the Shiites of Hezbollah in accordance with the Muslim code of *milmastia* (hospitality). The exiled Sunnis responded to this gesture of goodwill by assisting the efforts of their Shiite hosts to gain a foothold within Israel. It was something that Hezbollah had been unable to achieve, since the Islamic population of Israel remained almost entirely Sunni and remained actively antagonistic to the presence of a Shiite party within the waaf (“the land of Palestine”) (Williams, 2009).

Although initially, after the Islamic revolution in 1979, the zeal to export Shiite ideology shaped Iran's foreign policy, geopolitical considerations played a prominent role in the formulation of foreign policies later. Unlike during the early phase of the revolution, Iran's support for its coethnics in the near abroad is not based on emotions rather on geopolitical considerations. For example, Iran's relations with hard-line Shiite factions, such as al Sadr faction are occasional, tactical and short term and aimed at undermining the unilateral US policy of excluding Iran from Iraqi politics (Berzegar, 2010). Iran was quite aware of the fact that any long term support for the Shiite factions in Iraq would disturb power equations there and not serve its own interests in the long run by generating greater regional instability. Similarly, to prevent the US from preventing its influence in Afghanistan, Iran always played a role in the direction of making Herat a buffer zone between the US occupying forces and itself. Its multiple demonstrations of support for different non-Pushtun groups in their challenge to the Taliban during the latter's rise to power and alleged support for the Taliban to bog down the US forces point to the fact that coethnic groups did not remain the permanent constituency for Iranian support (Berzegar, 2010).

Iranian governing elites perceive their country's security resting in the security of the complete region comprising the Middle East, Central Asia and Southwest Asia. Iran acknowledges the interests and role of the US in maintaining security in the region by becoming involved in talks with the latter so as to develop various international mechanisms to ensure peace and security in Afghanistan and Iraq but it is against the overwhelming and long-term presence of US military force in the region. Iran perceives a greater US role in future in the region, given its geopolitical importance that would affect Iranian interests in the long-term. Iran is vociferous in stating opposition to any arrangement that would allow the US to position itself firmly in Afghanistan which shares a 936-kilometre-long border with the Islamic republic. Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar was categorical in stating that a strategic treaty between the US and Afghanistan would pose a threat to the interests of Iran and other regional countries (D' Souza, 2011). To counter the US role in the region, Iran has focused on a strategy of "offensive defence". This strategy is a way to ensure defence through active military engagement. But the problem lies in the exaggeration of the perception of an Iranian threat which might place Iran in an irreconcilable position vis a vis the US in terms of their respective



geopolitical interests. Barzegar (2010: 182) notes “experience has shown that the more Iran feels threatened, the more likely it remains to expand its regional presence. Though in the short term, Iran’s greater regional presence will promote its power of deterrent to engage with potential security threats, in the long term it will bring unnecessary tension and strategic discord to Iran’s relations with the region’s key players such as Saudi Arabia and the United States” (Berzegar, 2010).

Iran can destabilize the situation in Afghanistan if the US continues with its strategy of containment. For example, after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, President Bush warned Iran against meddling in Afghanistan. Partly to respond to the US’s censure, in February 2002 Iran expelled Karzai opponent Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, but did not arrest him. At other times, Afghanistan and Iran have had disputes over Iran’s efforts to expel Afghan refugees. About 1.2 million remain, mostly integrated into Iranian society, and a crisis erupted in May 2007 when Iran expelled about 50,000 into Afghanistan (Rahmani, 2009). The motive for expelling the Afghans follows the reasoning that while coalition forces announced the interception of Iranian-made weapons in southern Afghanistan and condemned the Iranians’ attempt to make contact with the Taliban, Iran had pushed for the mass expulsion of refugees in an effort to show that it could indirectly put pressure on the United States. Iran knew that with the return of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan, the economic crisis there would increase; the side effects of this would affect the Afghan government and consequently the role of the US would also be affected. In September 2007, there were reports of Iran’s indirect role in channeling Chinese weapons to militants in Afghanistan to fight the US forces there. Alex Vetanka, (Synovitz, 2010) the Washington-based Iranian analyst for Jane’s Information Group, argues that the presence of Chinese weapons so close to the Iranian border was the strongest evidence of Iran’s indirect role in the supply of weapons. The disclosure of secret American defense documents by Wikileaks also points to Iranian involvement in assisting the Taliban (Nelson, 2010). Iran also tried to destabilize the Afghan situation by reducing fuel supplies to Afghanistan during the cold months of 2010 on the grounds that Kabul had siphoned petrol and diesel to NATO forces. This move sparked an outcry in Kabul.

Iran has mounted criticisms regarding the US role in Afghanistan. The chairman of the Iranian Expediency Council, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, at a meeting with the visiting former UN secretary General Kofi

Annan, said that the “occupiers” who created “insecurity” in Afghanistan and Pakistan were now “unable to rein it in” (Bhadrakumar, 2010). In October 2008, Tehran invited former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani, who led the anti-Taliban coalition (Northern Alliance) in the 1990s, to official talks in Iran (?). Bhadrakumar argues that the scheduling of Rabbani’s visit was intended to signal that Iran still had reserves of influence with the Northern Alliance groups, despite the US estimation that these anti-Taliban groups have been scattered or bought over by Western intelligence (Bhadrakumar, 2010). Rabbani said that the solution to Afghan crisis lay in the national reconciliation among all tribes without any allowance for ethnic, tribal and religious prejudice. By saying this he reiterated the Iranian perspective on the solution to the Afghan problem. Iran condemned the Bush administration’s efforts to include Saudi Arabia to broker talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government (Bruno, 2009). Obama in his AfPak strategy recognized Saudi Arabia’s role as part of the regional solution to the Afghan problem. Iran criticized the US for only providing lip-service to regional cooperation while in reality it wanted to play a unilateral role in Afghanistan.

Finally, it can be inferred from the above analysis that Iran and the US can collaborate in Afghanistan only if both of them accommodate each other’s interests in the region. The US has to abandon its policy of containment towards Iran and recognize Iran’s influence in the region. There are a host of issues of common concerns like spread of drugs, the rise of extremism and the stability of Afghanistan which can form a basis for future cooperation. However, these issues will be relegated to the background unless geopolitical concerns are addressed by both of them.

## **Conclusion**

After the disintegration of the USSR and emergence of the Central Asian states, Iran’s conception of the region expanded. It saw its interests as being limited not only to the Persian Gulf or the Shia populated states; it also harbored an increasing interest in Central Asia and using Afghanistan as a corridor to Central Asia. South Asia also emerged as one of the biggest markets for Central Asian resources and therefore an important destination for Iran’s commercial interests. So to allow itself a chance to play a major role in the wider region, Iran shed its support for exclusively Shiite factions and enlarged its support to incorporate other groups in Afghanistan. Iran became more wary of the American role in the region.

Though Iran provides the shortest and cheapest routes for the transfer of the energy resources of Central Asia and therefore aspires to play a major role in oil politics, containment of Iran was so important for the US that the pipeline projects like the TAP and the pipeline through Turkey were given utmost importance despite their commercial non-viability.

So as to enable itself to play a major role in the region, Iran has striven to develop nuclear power. Secondly, it has developed a close friendship with Syria and support for militant factions like Hamas and Hezbollah as a means to support the Palestinian cause in its search to increase its influence among the Muslim nations. Instead of placating the US, it asserts its role emphatically. Iran's closure of nuclear facilities according to the wishes of the US could have allowed it nice economic returns in the region but at the cost of its aspirations to play the role of an independent regional power. Thus, the US containment strategy and Iran's role in the region have to be understood in the context of their geopolitical interests. To contain Iran and to meet its geopolitical interests, the US is driven more towards Pakistan; this consequently limits US-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, the US shares more overlapping interests with Iran than it does with its allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. They have common interest in the stability and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. However, geopolitics has ordained different, yet simultaneously confrontational, roles are to be played by the US and Iran in Afghanistan. Iran's endeavours to counter the US role and military presence in Afghanistan has led to its provision of assistance to Ismail Khan of Herat and allegedly to the Taliban in terms of finance and arms. It has even deployed members of the Hezbollah militant group to take up intelligence and insurgence activities. Iran has argued for the role of the UN to install a broad-based government in Afghanistan although the US has taken up a major role to sideline the participation of Iran in the resolution of the Afghan problem. Iran in order to promote its long-term interests has sought political and economic integration with Central Asia. To that end, it has taken up reconstruction activities in Afghanistan and made Herat a bridge to Central Asia.

Iran's long-term interests in Afghanistan rest on its aspirations to become a major regional power in the Middle East and Central Asian region. Iran's aspiration to develop nuclear energy, to act as a bridge between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf on the one hand and Central Asia and South Asia on the other for the energy supplies and its desire for a leadership role in the Middle East and Central Asian regions are some of

the long term objectives that have been factored into Iran's foreign policy making. Iran's role in Afghanistan, therefore, needs to be viewed from the perspective of its long-term interest in its immediate neighborhood.

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