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A Circumspect Approach  
for Maximum Gain**

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# Iran's Policy towards Taliban 2.0: A Circumspect Approach for Maximum Gain

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## Abstract

*The Taliban have remained rigid in their ideology and fundamentalism since the very beginning. Their interpretation of Shariah is considered to be the extreme version of Political Islam. On the other hand, Iran is also an ideological state that holds the Jafari school of thought supreme to its core guiding principle. The past relationship between these two ideologically-driven entities has remained hostile as Iran accused the Taliban of terrorism and harbouring terrorists during the 1990s. Nonetheless, over the years, Iran became apprehensive of the US presence inside Afghanistan which led to its interaction with the Taliban as a 'lesser evil'. Still, Iran did not want the Taliban to completely dominate Afghanistan's political setup once the US would withdraw. As after 15 August 2021, the Taliban are holding the reins of power inside Afghanistan, Iran's approach has been quite cautious. This paper attempts to examine how the cautious approach of Iran towards the Taliban, its motives, and the future scenario might unfold in Iran's policy towards the Taliban.*

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## **Introduction**

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took over Kabul after a 20-year-long battle against the US-led NATO forces. The fall of Kabul raised many questions over the political stability and security structure of the US-backed Afghan government as it could not withstand the rising force of the Taliban. Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan ended two decades-long NATO mission that was initiated in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The haphazard exit of the US left the globe both in dismay and disarray. It has created a power vacuum in the region and provided a chance for militant organizations like IS-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and other insurgent groups to galvanize and use Afghanistan as a launching pad to disrupt regional security. Nonetheless, the US exit also enabled regional states to take up charge of Afghanistan's stability for their respective interests. For example, China and Russia now have an excellent opportunity not only to extend their mutual operations through Afghanistan but also to protect their geo-economic and geopolitical goals. The key priorities of Pakistan in Afghanistan include avoiding Afghan territories to be used against Pakistan, containing militants in Afghanistan to improve the internal security situation, non-interference in internal affairs, stimulating people-to-people contact, deepening trade and transit ties, and undertaking joint energy ventures for robust economic connectivity.<sup>1</sup> China also has security concerns in Afghanistan like Pakistan. It wants to prevent extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan to have a spillover effect in Xinjiang in particular and the region in general, particularly the resurgence of the East

Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Russia sees the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces as a sign of the decline of the unipolar world order dominated by the US. Russia does not want instability in Afghanistan as it could have spillover in the Central Asian states which would lead to unwanted flight and migration towards Russia that would affect the Russian ambitions of putting an end to Islamist-motivated attacks on Russian soil, especially in the southern regions.<sup>3</sup> For Iran, the rising threat of ISKP in Afghanistan along with anti-Iranian sentiments within some factions of the Taliban is an utmost priority.

This paper, therefore, predominantly focuses on deciphering the existing power vacuum in the region after the US departure. Moreover, the strategies that are being deployed by Iran, both overtly and covertly, to secure its national interests will be discussed in this paper. The major focus, however, would be on Iran's policies towards Afghanistan and its regional prospects and consequences. Iran shares a volatile border with Afghanistan and, therefore, has stakes in Afghanistan's stability. The major influx of refugees, both previously and in contemporary times, has been borne by Iran alongside Pakistan. Similarly, the presence of dogmatic groups and access to Central Asian markets are some core concerns for Iran as well. Furthermore, the prospects of regional cooperation particularly that of Pakistan and Iran would be discussed in the end. Although Pakistan and Iran supported opposing groups inside Afghanistan in the previous Taliban government (1996-2001), the present focus on regionalism, economic connectivity, anti-terror campaign, and regional security are some of the converging features for Pakistan and Iran. Iran has been facing diplomatic challenges due to hostile relations

with the US. Moreover, the presence of an extra-territorial power in the region has hindered Iran from exploring opportunities for trade with the neighbouring countries, specifically Afghanistan. Therefore, the paper would deliberate on the reasons and pattern of Iran's policy shift towards Afghanistan and the challenges it faces.

### **Iran-Taliban Relations during the First Taliban Government (1996 – 2001)**

Iran had very hostile relations with the Taliban's first regime in Afghanistan. Like the other overwhelming majority of states, Iran refused to recognize the Taliban government due to sectarian, ideological and political differences. Iran, on the other hand, sought Burhanuddin Rabbani to return to power who was the president of Afghanistan from 1992 to 1996 and a political head of the Northern Alliance. Iran labelled the Taliban regime as a narco-terrorist group which provided an opportunity to other terrorist organizations for global insecurity. Iran also accused the Taliban of mixing the elements of both Islam and the tribal tradition of Pashtun to justify their acts.<sup>4</sup> One major reason for the Iran-Taliban rift was the rift between the Taliban and Hazara Shi'ites. Taliban, being adherents of the fundamentalist version of the Sunni school of thought, shared intense hatred towards the Shi'ites. During their early days, after the assumption of power, the Taliban explicitly reflected hatred against the Hazara community. The expulsion of other ethnic groups was followed later. However, the Taliban not only expressed ethnonationalism but even more severe was their adherence to fundamentalist Shariah ideology which brought them in opposition to many other Pashtun tribal elders and political elites.<sup>5</sup> Iran, on the other hand,

owing to its religious and revolutionary ideology, supported the Hazara Shi'ites in cultural, economic and political domains. Not only do Hazaras share cultural symmetry with Iran but they also speak a dialect of Persian. After 1979, Hazara mujaheddin were supported by Iran who fought against the Soviet Union during the infamous Afghan jihad. Moreover, thousands of Hazara were hosted by Iran who fled Afghanistan as a consequence of the Soviet-Afghan war along with other Afghan refugees. In the year 1998, a very tragic incident known as the Hazara massacre took place in the Afghan city of Mazar e Sharif. The incident resulted in the killings of nearly 2000 Hazara men along with Iranian diplomats.<sup>6</sup> It resulted in further deterioration in the bilateral ties to the extent that Iran, for the first time, moved its military towards the Afghanistan border.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the internal frictions, the relations between Iran and the Taliban were also affected by geopolitical considerations i.e. the religious ideology that was emanating from Saudi Arabia which viewed Iran as the biggest ideological rival. It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia was pivotal in providing ideological backing to the Taliban regime along with training and resources from the US. As per an expert, the successes the Taliban secured in the past could not have happened without the support of Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup> With the arrival of Saudi backed Taliban regime, Iran was apprehensive about the spread of Wahhabism and subsequently the emergence of a threatening ideology within Iran's immediate neighbourhood.

## **Iran's Policy towards Afghanistan during the US Presence**

The US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and overthrew the Taliban. Iran opted for a pragmatic approach during the American presence in the region. The interests of both states converged in the beginning concerning Afghanistan, i.e., both wanted to establish a stable order and security in the region. Therefore, despite all the differences, Iran did not openly oppose the US policy in Afghanistan. The main motive for Iran was to prevent the rise of any extremist ideology in its neighbourhood that could challenge its regional interest. Iranian approach to pragmatic politics was reflected in the concept proposed by the then Iranian President Muhammad Khatami, called 'Dialogue among the Civilizations'. It was aimed at bridging the gap between Iran and the rest of the world particularly with the West.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, in terms of actual presence on the ground, Iran was strictly opposed to the US military involvement in Afghanistan as it could lead to Iran's encirclement by the US and hinder Iran's regional policy. Furthermore, the long-term US presence inside Afghanistan would mean the pro-US government inside Kabul which eventually occurred as well in the form of Hamid Karzai. However, he faced strong opposition from the ethnic groups that were not ready to accept him as their leader. Iran played a significant role in filling the gap between the Northern Alliance and Pashtun President Hamid Karzai.<sup>10</sup> The top Iranian diplomat, Javad Zarif, convinced the leaders of the Northern Alliance to extend their support to the Karzai government effectively stabilize Afghanistan. According to a prominent Afghan leader, "If it weren't for Iran, our Western friends would not be able to come

today so easily and tell us about all the things they have done for us.”<sup>11</sup> The major reason for this cordial approach of Tehran was driven by its pragmatism as the US proved helpful in neutralizing the threat of the Taliban for Iran.<sup>12</sup>

## **Iran’s Perspective on US Presence**

Right after the revolution of 1979, Iran and the US locked horns with each other for regional supremacy. Therefore, the US military presence inside Afghanistan in a long run was perceived negatively by Iran. Having allies in the form of the Gulf States, Iran feared that a long-term US presence would put it in the regional dilemma of countering the US on both sides. The resentment grew with time when President Bush listed Iran in the ‘Axis of Evil’. Iran became apprehensive that the US military could use Afghan soil to carry out their spying activities which could challenge Iran both internally and externally. One particular event that reaffirmed Iranian grievances was the crashing of the US predator drone in Iranian airspace in December 2011. Upon investigation, it was revealed that the drone came from Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

Iran did everything to prevent any agreement which could pave the way for US military presence in Afghanistan. They negotiated with the Afghan parliament and the Karzai government directly to avoid a long-term framework for cooperation. During the whole time, Iran’s approach was to act moderately, which was regarded as a policy of balancing the threats. Iran, therefore, provided funding to many warlords and insurgents to pursue its interests in Afghanistan. Apart from military support, Iran also invested heavily in Afghanistan to build its soft power for multiple reasons. One was to maintain its

regional influence through the Hazara and Tajik groups which were closer to Iran ideologically. The second was to counter the US in Afghanistan. The Iranian investment was not only limited to economic means. Tehran sponsored massive efforts for social engineering that included building pro-Iran schools and madrasas in different parts of Afghanistan. One of the largest madrasas named *Khatam-al Nabyeen* in the centre of Afghanistan promoted the ideology of *Wilayat-e-Faqih*. The facility is currently run by a prominent cleric, Ayatollah Mohseni, who shares deep contacts with the clerics of Qom.

Apart from consolidating its traditional ties inside Afghanistan, Iran also pursued the policy of strategic hedging.<sup>14</sup> Iran considered the Taliban as a pivotal entity in countering the US in Afghanistan. Therefore, it supported the Taliban and the Afghan government simultaneously in the hope of paving the way for the US withdrawal and maximizing the influence in the country once the US presence ended. In 2017, Iran reportedly transported weapons to the Taliban through Russia.<sup>15</sup> It was also reported that Iran provided light arms, rifles, and even training to Taliban forces on Iranian soil.<sup>16</sup>

## **Post-US Opportunities for Iran in Afghanistan**

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan provided opportunities for Iran both internally and in the geopolitical realm. On the ideological front, Iran's anti-US narrative is much strengthened owing to the haphazard US escape from Afghanistan. Iran exploited the Taliban's takeover for manoeuvring its political narratives to depict the US defeat. At the very same time, when the presence of the Taliban was

contributing to the geo-political and geo-strategic gains for Iran, it also caused a security concern for Iran. Hence, Iran was pretty cautious in welcoming the Taliban to power. The Iranian officials stated on different occasions that the Iranian policy towards the new rule in Afghanistan will be based on the behaviour of the Taliban towards the Islamic Republic.<sup>17</sup> Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, in his speech on 28 August, said, "The nature of our relations with governments depends on the nature of their relations with us."<sup>18</sup>

In post-US Afghanistan, Iran has a strategic advantage in the region which it could use to pursue its interests merged with geoeconomics and geopolitics. Iran and Afghanistan also engaged in economic activities. The trade at the bilateral level between the two countries was almost 1.75 billion dollars in 2020 which was already witnessing a downward trajectory owing to the US withdrawal from JCPOA.<sup>19</sup> Iran was one of the biggest exporters of food, medicine, and other products to the Afghan market as well. After the US withdrawal, the trade volume increased and economic ties favoured Iran because of the inability of Afghanistan to produce its own goods and the impending sanctions that hampered the acquisition of products from the global market. Moreover, the Taliban also lowered the import tariff by one-eighth, which made the process much easier and faster for Iranian economic activities.<sup>20</sup> Afghanistan also provides an alternative market to Iran in the times of US sanctions upon the latter. Apart from that, Iran has also been active in investing in Afghanistan. The main area of Iran's investment inside Afghanistan is the small and medium industries that include the sectors like mining, power generation, infrastructure, agriculture, and education.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, due to being a war-torn country for decades, Afghanistan has only a few energy production facilities. Therefore, 80 per cent of its energy requirements are met through imports for which Iran is its third largest source of energy with a 21 per cent share.<sup>22</sup> This provided Iran with the economic weightage inside Afghanistan that it could use as political leverage.

Iran's engagement with Afghanistan had many aspects which became further highlighted after August 2021. Iran was keen to develop multilateral relations with other countries in the region using Afghanistan as the trade route. The Chabahar Port project of Iran in collaboration with India is a good example where Iran was facilitating India to develop bilateral trade relations with Afghanistan and with landlocked Central Asian Republics (CARs).<sup>23</sup> The fiasco created after the US exited Afghanistan also paved the way for multilateral regional cooperation that Iran hoped for with China, Russia, and Pakistan. China also welcomed the Taliban's re-emergence in Afghanistan which Iran saw as an opportunity to enhance regional cooperation. President Raisi, after taking charge of the office, called Chinese President Xi Jinping to express the willingness of Iran to cooperate with China in establishing security, stability, and peace in Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> The vacuum created by the US provided the necessary space for regional powers like China, Russia, and Iran to establish their partnership over the Afghanistan issue. It also coincided with Iran's 'Look East Policy' which is further reflected by its recent membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Therefore, Iran finds ample opportunity to institutionalize the regional framework as an alternative to the US.

## Issues and Challenges

Iranian influence in Afghan politics is not limited to only one section, Iran maintained good ties with a majority of Afghan segments. For example, it enjoyed a strong political relationship with the central government and with the warlords as well which made Iran a major actor in this regard. As previously discussed, its support albeit limited, to the Taliban is also well documented. However, despite this, there are still some elements that oppose Iranian influence in the political structure of Afghanistan. Besides, multiple issues can create problems in the bilateral relations between Iran and Afghanistan in the future. The issues include water rights, narcotics that come from the Afghan routes, and an increasing number of Afghan refugees in Iran. Despite Iran's geopolitical interests in Afghanistan, the aforementioned variables are major issues and challenges which can bedevil Iran's ties with the Taliban.

The water issue has been a bone of contention between Iran and Afghanistan, dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> There is a shortage of water in both states, especially in the parts of Iran bordering Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> Helmand River, which provides water to the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan, is the largest water source for many areas of Afghanistan. The main concern is about the water-sharing mechanism between the two countries. An accord was signed between the two countries about the use of river water in 1973. The deal was disrupted due to the political situation of both states in 1979. The Afghan stakeholders accused Iran of taking more than 820 million cubic meters from the Helmand River, which Iran was not entitled to take according to agreements.<sup>27</sup> For Iran, the major concern was its local population

which was living near the river and was highly dependent on the water. There were numerous occasions when locals were forced to leave the area due to a shortage of water like in 2001 when the residents of almost 12 villages abandoned the area due to water problems.<sup>28</sup> Iran had serious concerns over the construction of the Kamal Khan Dam in the Nimroz province of Afghanistan because it was to disrupt the flow of water and create serious water issues in Iranian provinces in the coming years.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the Bakhsh Abad Dam in Farah province also added to the water issues as a huge number of the population depends on the water coming from these sources.<sup>30</sup> The water issue was renewed after the Taliban takeover following the opening of the Kamal Khan Dam by the Taliban.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding narcotics, Iran stood very high among drug-consuming countries. It is reported that more than two million people were addicted to drugs like heroin and opium.<sup>32</sup> This problem was directly connected with Afghanistan as it was the biggest opium producer in the world. The opium was transferred to Europe and other parts of the world through Iran as it became the easiest trade route due to its porous border with Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> From being a transit route for drug trafficking, Iran became a hub of consumption as well. This created an enormous problem for the young population of Iran as the youth makes up the majority of the population. Iran seemed to be more serious than any other country regarding counter-drug activities in Afghanistan and stopping the flow of drugs from Iranian soil. Iran established the 'Joint Planning Cell of Triangular Initiative' under which Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan worked together towards mitigating the issue. With the empowerment of the Taliban, however, the future discourse

over the drug issue is unclear.<sup>34</sup> It is reflected by the UN report which stated the rise of opium production under the Taliban rule in 2022.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, despite the current ban imposed by high-ranking Taliban officials upon drug cultivation, Afghanistan's economic crunch could result in more harvesting of opium and other drugs which would affect the bordering countries, including Iran.

Finally, in the case of refugees, Iran hosts nearly 780,000 registered Afghan refugees while another 2.1 million are undocumented. Tehran, Isfahan, and Razavi Khorasan host nearly 55 per cent of these refugees.<sup>36</sup> After the takeover of the Taliban, the refugees inside Iran faced a hard time as well. The anti-Afghan sentiment rose inside Iran during Ramadan of 2022 when two Iranian scholars were attacked by a refugee at a holy shrine in Mashhad. One of the victims later died while the other was gravely injured. Spokesperson of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Saeed Khatibzadeh, warned the Taliban to take the matter of refugees seriously as there are elements that are trying to instil Iranophobia among the refugees.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the attacks in Shiraz during the anti-hijab protests exacerbated Iran's fear of terrorism emanating from Afghan soil. As a result, the refugees were directly affected as the security measures got stern. This caused a diplomatic stir between Iran and Afghanistan as the Taliban raised concerns over the 'mistreatment' of refugees.<sup>38</sup> As the influx of refugees paced up after the Taliban takeover and Iran's security concerns are raised after the 2022 terrorist attacks, the issue of refugees would be troublesome in the working relations between Iran and the Taliban.

## Conclusion

The relations between Iran and the Taliban have remained hostile, however, the opposition to the US forces stationed inside Afghanistan was the converging point between the two. The alleged transfer of small arms by Iran could not be equated with Iranian support to the Taliban. Instead, Iran cautiously supported the Taliban so that the US was kept engaged within Afghanistan and Iran would not have to face the US threat on multiple border fronts. Furthermore, Iran also ensured that its support to the Taliban would not result in over-strengthening the latter at the cost of other groups with which Iran had cultural and religious ties. For this very reason, Iran opposed the US-Taliban peace deal as it in a way legitimized the status of the Taliban within Afghanistan. The continuation of Iran's diplomatic mission after the Taliban takeover only highlighted the fact that Iran considers the Taliban as a reality inside Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it does not consider the group as the legitimate successor of the US-backed Afghan government. Therefore, what better explains the current state of affairs between Iran and the Taliban is necessity dependence, i.e., the Taliban require working relations with the neighbouring states to consolidate their status abroad while, for Iran, Afghanistan presents the opportunity for an alternative market as well as an arena where regional collaboration would be underway. Finally, the possibility for Iran to recognize the Taliban even if the other regional states would formalize their diplomatic missions inside Kabul is unlikely as, for Iran, the significance of its ethnic and religious linkages far supersedes its relations with the Taliban. Furthermore, Iran already has security leverage over the Taliban as well in the form of *Fatimiyoan* which could also serve Iran's

interests inside Afghanistan. Resultantly, the more probable scenario could be Iran's interaction with the Taliban which could help the former to place its favourable candidates within the interim setup for maximum leverage and generate the hope of replicating it into a structured political diversity. Nonetheless, the friction between the two is likely to prevail on issues related to water, refugees, treatment of minorities and drugs. The rifts, however, are more likely to remain secondary until a proper governmental mechanism isn't placed inside Afghanistan.

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