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Iran courts the US's allies

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi

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As the prospect of much-discussed dialogue between the [United States](#) and Iran on Afghanistan languishes ahead of Iran's June 12 presidential elections, Tehran is not wasting any time in deepening its ties with Pakistan and Afghanistan. A trilateral mini-summit in Tehran over the weekend brought the leaders of the countries together and culminated in a comprehensive "Tehran declaration".

It could be termed an anti-extremism summit, as the primary focus of the Tehran talks was regional coordination in the fight against terrorism and extremism. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told the visiting Afghan and Pakistani presidents, Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari, that "we [Iran] strongly support trilateral cooperation".

For his part, Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadinejad spoke frankly about the "heavy problems confronting the region", citing "extremism, military intervention, drug traffic and terrorism". The three presidents are scheduled to meet again in the near future in the Pakistani capital Islamabad.

Such a noticeable improvement in Iran's relations with two US-backed regimes from the region will probably have positive dividends for upcoming US-Iran talks. Ahmadinejad said at a press conference on Monday that these had been postponed until after the Iranian presidential elections - at Iran's insistence. He also proposed a face-to-face debate with US President Barack Obama at the United Nations if he won re-election.

For Karzai in particular, who is counting on an easy win in Afghanistan's presidential elections in August, this was a timely gathering that added to his political assets. Some Iranian commentators have said his presence in Tehran represented a "green light" from Iran for his re-election. They say Tehran is pleased with Karzai's timely shielding of Iran against US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allegations that it is funneling arms to the Taliban, and feels there is no viable alternative to Karzai.

But this does not mean all is harmonious in Iran-Afghan relations, as Tehran continues to complain about Kabul over its anti-drug trafficking efforts and reticence over the long-

running dispute over access to the Hirmand River, which originates in mountains northwest of Kabul and flows some 1,000 kilometers before reaching Iran.

Iran wants to see the implementation of an agreement on the river that would divert some 25 cubic meters of water per second toward Iran. But Kabul has erected the Kamal Khan dam, which diverts Hirmand's water, adding to the problems of western provinces in Iran already facing severe water shortages.

Karzai should not take Tehran's political support for granted. The leading opposition figure, Abdullah Abdullah, from the Afghanistan National Front, still has the chance to lobby Tehran should he choose to do so. If he is successful, Iran's "green light" may actually turn amber between now and August.

The German special envoy on Afghanistan and Pakistan, Bernd Mutzelberg, is also visiting Tehran this week and this could be significant in terms of both Iran-[Germany](#) as well as Iran-NATO relations. This is particularly true as German military assistance in Afghanistan is non-offensive and largely focused on logistics, which are an important issue given NATO's pursuit of an Iranian supplies corridor to Afghanistan.

With respect to Pakistan, both the Israeli as well as Indian press have reported that Pakistani technical assistance may have aided Iran in the development of its the medium-range Sejil-2 missile, which it successfully launched on May 20 from Semnan, in northern Iran. The Sejil-2 reportedly has a range of 1,250 kilometers.

Iran's latest missile test has been widely interpreted in the world media as a sign of military defiance that is geared towards the presidential race. True, but equally important is the effect of such missile tests on US-Russia dialogue over the US's plans to install an anti-missile system in parts of Eastern [Europe](#).

Despite an apparent softening of the Barack Obama administration's stance on that matter, according to Russian officials, there is no sign of the US changing its policy. As a result, Russia still plans the counter-measure of stationing its Iskander missiles in areas close to [Eastern Europe](#). Obama said in early April that the US would go ahead with the missile plan "as long as Iran's threat continues".

Iran's missile test simply keeps the US and Russia at odds over an important strategic issue. This is to the detriment of the US's Iran policy, for which it has sought Moscow's full cooperation.

A more important outcome of Zardari's visit to Tehran may have been the signing of a joint declaration with Ahmadinejad on a multi-billion dollar gas pipeline project known as the "peace pipeline". According to the purchase agreement signed between the two sides' energy companies, the 2,100-kilometer-long pipeline will transfer Iranian gas to Pakistan. (See ['Ethno-democracy' in Afghanistan](#), Asia Times Online, Oct 13, 2004.)

Some 1,100 kilometers of the pipeline will be laid in Iranian territory and 1,000 kilometers in Pakistan and the project involves the export of some 750 million cubic feet of Iranian gas per day. Construction of the pipeline is expected to be complete in five years.

The big question now is whether India, despite pressure from [Washington](#), will set aside its

hesitations and join the "peace pipeline", as Iranian and Pakistani officials hope. According to some Iranian oil experts, [India](#) does not have many alternatives and will join sooner or later as "it would be illogical for New Delhi not to do so".

Illogical or not, India so far has not resisted the temptation to sign, but this may also wait until Ahmadinejad's second term should he wins the presidential contest in mid-June.

At a time when the other three leading presidential candidates seem [united](#) in criticizing Iran's "isolation", the trilateral summit and the prospect of getting India involved in the pipeline project could translate into much-needed good news for Ahmadinejad. Although he is a controversial president, Ahmadinejad has done much to strengthen the institution of the presidency in Iran.