

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

IWPR

Regional Summit Dismissed as “Elaborate Showpiece”

By Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimi in Mazar-e Sharif

06/04/2009

**Afghanistan is joining its neighbors to devise a regional solution to their common crisis
– but will it amount to much?**

The photos from the May 24 trilateral summit in Teheran said it all: a beaming Iranian president Mahmoud Amahdinejad, flanked by his equally cheerful Afghan and Pakistani counterparts, Hamed Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari, strode confidently down the red carpet, all three with hands linked, smiling for the cameras.

The contrast with a Washington tripartite meeting earlier this month between United States president Barack Obama, Zardari and Karzai could hardly have been more stark.

While billed as a stab at developing a regional approach to problems, it appeared to exacerbate tensions rather than resolve them. At the closing press conference Obama addressed the media determinedly, while a solemn Zardari and a frankly dour Karzai stood silently at his side.

Whatever the stated message of the Teheran summit, the symbolism was clear: three neighbours were seeking a way out of their common crisis without relying on the West.

The occasion also marked Iran’s emergence as a regional player, with a clear intention of exerting its influence in the region.

The summit produced a trilateral agreement, called the Teheran Statement, which outlined

plans to expand cooperation for solving problems, developing the region, fighting radicalism and terrorism, and combating drug smuggling and weapons trafficking, along with the unauthorised movement of people. The three countries pledged to cooperate in the economic, social and cultural spheres.

Karzai's press office issued a statement in which the Afghan president praised the initiative, saying, "Radicalism, war, and disunity are regional problems ... If we had cooperated in the past, we would not be facing these problems today."

All three presidents promised cooperation to resolve their common problems, with the underlying text being that "brother countries", which share a common history, geography, and religion are more appropriate partners than the western interlopers who are so prominently present in Afghanistan.

The summit was long on declarations of friendship, but a bit short on actual strategy or plans for reaching the stated objectives.

Afghan political analysts regard the Teheran meeting as an elaborate showpiece, aimed at demonstrating to the West their strength and importance.

Ahmad Saeedi, who's served as an Afghan diplomat in Iran and Pakistan, told IWPR that the meeting revealed the growing desperation of Karzai, who returned from Washington angry and dejected at the cold reception he had received, and the various pressures applied by the new administration.

Obama has never been a fan of Karzai's, and many observers thought that the US was actively seeking an alternative. While it now seems likely that Karzai will retain his office after the August elections, it is becoming apparent that he will have little real power if America has its way.

According to Saeedi, Iran and Pakistan are exploiting the widening fissures in what once was a close relationship, prying Karzai away from the West.

Ahmadinejad is also facing elections next month, and, said Saeedi, is using the summit to bolster his image at home.

"Ahmadinejad recently started his election campaign with the motto 'Down with America! Down with Israel' which is just the continuation of his old policies," said Saeedi. "Now he wants to show that he is important in the region, and he also wants to talk about 'common enemies'."

Iran and Pakistan also have common interests, added Saeedi: they have recently signed a pipeline deal to export natural gas from Iran through Pakistan to India. This is the pipeline that the US has seemed so intent on blocking, preferring to bypass its traditional foe Iran and send gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to consumers in Pakistan and India.

He said for Afghanistan, however, the meeting held little real value.

"This crisis is not going to be solved by Iran and Pakistan, but by the honest support of western countries and regional cooperation," said Saeedi. "Our experience over the past 30

years has shown that our two neighbours have done more to create the crisis in Afghanistan than to solve it.”

Political analyst Wahid Muzhda sees the Teheran summit as an opportunity for Iran and Pakistan to further their own agendas, using Afghanistan as a tool.

“Strong countries always use the weaker ones in such meetings,” he said. “Whether or not Afghanistan can have real influence here depends on the intelligence of Afghanistan’s politicians.”

But, he added, there are important differences with the Teheran summit, “We witnessed such meetings with neighbouring countries in the past, but before America was not paying attention. Now these sessions are significant for the United States.”

The Obama administration had emphasised a regional approach to problem solving, he explained.

But he agreed with Saeedi that both Iran and Pakistan were eager to further their own interests through such regional cooperation.

“Iran is taking advantage of the present circumstances to send a message to America: you can no longer ignore Iran’s role in the region,” he said.

Relations between Iran and the US have been frosty for the past 30 years, largely as a result of the 1979 revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis, in which 66 staff members of the US embassy were held for 444 days by radical Islamists. Since Obama took office, there has been a noticeable thaw.

But regardless of other considerations, said Muzhda, all three countries are genuinely concerned about the present crisis in the region.

“Circumstances have changed,” he said. “The situation in Pakistan is not good, and the US military has a presence on Iran’s doorstep.”

Afghanistan now hosts 70,000 foreign troops, the overwhelming majority of whom are American. This has sharpened the focus of both Iran and Pakistan in dealing with their troubled neighbour.

The US has accused Iran of providing weapons to the insurgents in Afghanistan, a charge that Teheran has repeatedly denied. It has also blamed Pakistan for not doing more to stem the tide of radicalism within its borders.

If Iran and Pakistan ignore what is happening in their backyard, they will also be consumed by the crisis, says parliamentarian Kabir Ranjbar.

“It is a very good thing that these countries are interested in discussing the problems in the region,” he told IWPR. “It does not matter whether they were playing a double game in the past. Now they have to be straightforward.”

Ranjbar pointed to the government of Pakistan, which is now engaged in a full-blown conflict

with radicals in its western regions. Iran was also paying more attention to the problem, he added.

“The issues that were discussed in the meeting were international ones, that threatened all three countries,” he said. “Now they all now that if they are slow to take action, they will become victims.”

Ranjbar is adamant that the new attitude of cooperation should lead to real changes, and not be limited to political showboating.

“The important thing is the continuation of these meetings,” he said. “They should focus on carrying out the initiatives discussed in previous meetings, and making plans for the future.”