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Iran carves out an AfPak hub

By M K Bhadrakumar
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The participation of the presidents of Pakistan and Afghanistan in the international conference on terrorism held in Tehran over the weekend becomes a major diplomatic and political victory for Iran at the present juncture of regional politics. Both Asif Ali Zardari and Hamid Karzai were received by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei.

One main focus of the conference was to highlight that the United States has been using international terrorism as the pretext to intervene in Afghanistan and in the Middle East and to interfere in their internal affairs. Khamenei's message to the conference, in a nutshell, highlighted the "calculations of satanic world powers, which use terrorism in their policies and planning to achieve their illegitimate goals".

Khamenei alleged that the US finances and arms terrorist groups in the region and, most interestingly, he singled out for reference the "crimes" by the Blackwater (Xe Services) group of "assisting terrorist groups" in Pakistan as "part of this shameful and unforgettable list of American acts of terrorism".

Expressing solidarity with the growing criticism by Islamabad and Kabul against the excesses of the US's military operations in AfPak, Khamenei added, "The deadly attacks by the American drones against defenseless families in villages [of Pakistan] and in the most deprived areas of Afghanistan have repeatedly turned weddings into mourning ceremonies." Khamenei said in a scathing attack on the US's regional policies:

With such behavior, it is a shame [for the US] to claim to be leading the fight against terrorism ... From the standpoint of the leaders of the hegemonic powers [read US], everything that threatens

their illegitimate interests is viewed as terrorism. All struggles intended to defend a cause against the occupiers and interventionist forces are regarded by them as terrorism.

Zardari highlighted at the conference that Pakistan had suffered immensely during the decade of the US-led war in Afghanistan. He said over 5,000 Pakistani security personnel had lost their lives and the estimated damage in financial terms amounts to US\$37 billion for the Pakistani economy. Zardari stressed the importance of the "vital need for a collective campaign" by the regional states in the "war on terror".

Overlapping security interests

Karzai, on the other hand, said, "I believe that the campaign against terrorism is not possible through merely military means." He called for unity, a firm stand and "collective cooperation" by Muslim states in the fight against terrorism.

On the eve of the conference, Zardari and Karzai held a tripartite meeting with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, which, again, "urged close cooperation among regional countries" over the issues of "peace and security in the Middle East". The Iranian president's office said, "[Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan] pledged to expand their cooperation in political, security, economic and cultural areas as well as fighting terrorism and foreign interventions."

From the Iranian perspective, a main objective was to forge common thinking with Pakistan and Afghanistan that the continuance of the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Afghanistan adversely impacts on all three countries' national interests and on regional security and stability. This comes out clearly in the meetings Khamenei had with Zardari and Karzai.

Khamenei sought an "all-out expansion of ties" between Iran and Pakistan and cautioned Zardari that "Washington is trying to sow seeds of dissension in Pakistan to meet its illegitimate goals". He expressed his appreciation that the Pakistani people were well aware of the US's "ominous intention" and are resisting the US's "hegemonic plots".

Khamenei's reference went beyond the earlier allegation by Ahmadinejad that Tehran had "specific evidence" of a US conspiracy to seize Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Khamenei seemed to imply that the US plans to destabilize the Pakistan' state in order to weaken it and to break its resolve to resist US dominance, as well as to hamper its capacity to play an effective role in the region.

Clearly, the tensions that have accrued in the US-Pakistan relationship in the recent period provide the backdrop for this exchange. This is the first time that such a reference has been made at Khamenei's level. Zardari's delegation included Interior Minister Rehman Malik, which suggests the Pakistani expectation of Iran sharing details of its perception regarding the security implications of the US's regional policies.

Malik indeed had a separate meeting with Iran's Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar, who was previously Iran's defense minister and belongs to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. The Iranian account of the meeting suggested that it was mainly concerned with the

activities of the terrorist group Jundallah, which operates out of Pakistan in Iran's eastern border province of Sistan-Balochistan.

"We discussed ways to collaborate on the fight against extremists and terrorists who use Pakistani soil for actions against Iran's interests," Mohammad-Najjar said. Significantly, Tehran is making a distinction between Jundallah and the Pakistani state, whereas there have been earlier allegations of Pakistani complicity. Whether Malik (who was a former head of Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency) also met with Iran's powerful Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi remains unclear.

At his meeting with Karzai, Khamenei frontally attacked the US plans to set up military bases in Afghanistan. "The Americans are after permanent bases in Afghanistan, which is a dangerous issue because as long as US troops are in Afghanistan, there would be no real security. The Afghan people are suffering from the US military presence in their country and this presence is a great pain for them and the entire region", he said.

The meeting with Karzai took place two days after US President Barack Obama's announcement of a troop drawdown in Afghanistan. Khamenei told Karzai that a rapid pullout of US troops was in the interests of Afghanistan and the region. He was confident that Afghanistan was capable of "controlling its affairs and determining its fate".

Having said that, all indications are that in the Iranian assessment, the US may be compelled to abandon its earlier plans to set up military bases in Afghanistan due to a combination of circumstances - the Taliban's uncompromising opposition, the US's economic crisis and overall war weariness and the urgency to concentrate on the Middle East and Africa.

Meanwhile, Tehran keeps urging Karzai not to give in to the US plans. What worries Iran most is that the planned US military bases include Herat and Shindad in western Afghanistan on the border with Iran.

Broad convergence

The big question is how tangible will be an Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan regional axis over the Afghan problem. The short answer is that the axis is both a matter of appearance as well as of some substance and how the proportion works out will depend on the acuteness of the situation in Afghanistan and the regional milieu.

At this point in time, the varying degrees of antipathy felt toward the US on the part of Pakistan and Afghanistan on the one hand and Iran's inveterate standoff with the US on the other give impetus to the three neighboring countries drawing closer.

Both Zardari and Karzai undertook the visit to Tehran with the full awareness that it signified an act of "strategic defiance" of the US - and more important, they knew that Washington would get the message as well. That is to say, the "Iran connection" gets them some room to maneuver vis-a-vis the US.

But then, there are also specific interests for Kabul and Islamabad to forge an understanding with Iran. Karzai would like to secure all the political support that Iran can provide that enables him to press ahead with the reconciliation with the Taliban.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hezb-i-Islami, which is represented in Karzai's government, lived in exile in Iran for five years. Iran also wields influence over a variety of non-Pashtun forces that happen to harbor misgivings about Karzai's peace plans of reconciling the Taliban.

In a worst-case scenario, Iran could prove to be a "spoiler", while Karzai's negotiating strength substantially increases vis-a-vis the US (and Pakistan) in political terms if Iran is seen as his partner.

Iran's support for the peace process as next-door neighbor is an imperative need for Karzai to reach a durable Afghan settlement. The bottom line is that reciprocally Tehran would expect Karzai to keep in mind at all times the red line regarding Iran's legitimate interests in Afghanistan and act accordingly.

Karzai has managed to maintain good equations with Tehran all through despite US interference. From this angle, Khamenei's strong demarche with Karzai regarding US military bases in Afghanistan could prove to be a clincher.

In the past, Iran's and Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan often proved to be at loggerheads. But a qualitative change has taken place. For Pakistan, gnawed by apprehensions of the US's intentions toward it, Iran as a friendly neighbor becomes a critically important asset today.

Especially so, as Iranian inputs regarding the US's covert activities inside Pakistan will be of invaluable use and solidarity with Iran helps mitigate the US pressure. For Tehran, too, it is important that Pakistan does its utmost to ensure that Jundallah activities from its soil are curtailed and the possibility of third countries exploiting Jundallah as a means to destabilize Iran is excluded.

Equally, Pakistan is a major Sunni country and Iran's interest lies in ensuring that it does not become part of the Saudi-led alliance against Iran in the Middle East. Iran can flaunt its friendship with Pakistan to expose the Saudi campaign to whip up the phobia of a Shi'ite-Sunni schism in the Middle East today by way of branding Tehran as the leader of the Shi'ite camp and rallying the Sunni Arab opinion.

The Taliban used to be a divisive issue in the Iran-Pakistan relationship. But this is no longer the case, as the cutting edge of the Afghan situation today for both countries lies in regard to the US's military presence. Both Iran and Pakistan agree that a long-term US presence in Afghanistan should be somehow scuttled. Also, the Taliban have transformed, which is what the direct contacts between them and the US (without Islamabad's knowledge) suggest.

Above all, Iran's comfort level is much higher today regarding a fair deal in an Afghan settlement for the Afghan groups with which Iran has enjoyed historical and cultural links. The

old-style Pashtun dominance of Afghanistan is a non-starter as there has been a sort of "political awakening" among the Afghan people.

Iran also would factor in that the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the ensuing downstream consequences have greatly reduced the capacity of the Pakistani state to dictate an Afghan settlement unilaterally. Karzai is the best bet under the present circumstances for both Iran and Pakistan as the leader of an "Afghan-led" peace process. All these elements have contributed to the broad convergence of interests between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

How this convergence plays out in the coming weeks and months will have a significant bearing on the course of events in Afghanistan and it will no doubt impact the reconciliation process with the Taliban.

Iran will have the maximum interest in forging a regional axis out of this broad convergence of interests and concerns and making it a real driving force that shapes events to come rather than acts as a mere catalyst. But it takes two - or in this case three - to tango.