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Iran and Afghanistan: A Relationship of Shared Interests and Complexity

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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Iran and Afghanistan have much in common to bind them together, but also many differences that distinguish them from one another. Their shared cross-border cultural, linguistic, ethnic and sectarian linkages, as well as security imperatives, strongly underpin their need for good and peaceful neighbourly coexistence. Yet, this has been, both historically and in contemporary times, punctuated from time to time by their divergent domestic and foreign policy outlooks and security postures, as well as the capacity to influence each other in support of their national and regional priorities. Resourceful Iran has had more power of dispersion and extraction in the relationship than the largely poor and turbulent Afghanistan. The resultant imbalances have endowed Tehran with more bargaining capabilities than that of Kabul in the two sides' prioritisation of their policies towards one another.

While it is tempting to try to contextualise the evolution of Iran-Afghanistan relations historically, the focus of this article is primarily the shared and divergent interests that have come to shape their relations, mainly during the US-led intervention in Afghanistan over the last two decades, an intervention that will terminate soon. The analysis is largely from an Iranian angle, with emphasis on three main issues. The first is to explore the main objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy behaviour towards Afghanistan. The second is to assess the degree of leverage of influence that Tehran may have managed to secure so that the changing Afghan situation does not adversely affect Iran's national and regional interests, and the means and methods by which Tehran has sought to advance its objectives. The third is to examine briefly where Iran is likely to stand in relation to a post-US Afghanistan.

Objectives

As is the case with any state, the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy is essentially a reflection of its domestic politics. The confluence of internal and external factors has played a key role in influencing its behaviour towards its neighbours. Afghanistan is no exception in this respect. The fact that Afghanistan is war-torn, with its future shrouded in uncertainty, makes the country a more vulnerable target to outside and, for that matter, Iranian interventionism than otherwise may have been the case.

Ever since the start of Afghanistan's turbulence more than 40 years ago with the pro-Soviet coup in April 1978 and Soviet invasion twenty months later, which coincided with the advent of Iran's Islamic regime, Tehran has been concerned about the potential impact of its neighbour's misfortunes on its domestic and regional security settings.¹ While managing to contain any major fallout from these developments, along with fighting Iraq in a decade-long war in the 1980s and locking horns with the United States as its global arch-adversary, the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, starting in October 2001, produced two contrasting results for Tehran. On the one hand, it toppled the anti-

¹ For a detailed background discussion, see Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2012; Amin Saikal, *Iran at the Crossroads*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.



Iranian regime of the Pakistan-backed and Saudi-patronised extremist Sunni Islamic Taliban and dispersed the leadership and main operatives of Al Qaeda whose 9 / 11 attacks had triggered the US invasion. On the other, it brought American forces next door, enabling the US to establish military bases, including one very close to the Iranian border, and also in the Central Asian republics bordering Afghanistan. This, together with the US deployment in the Gulf and the subsequent 2003 American invasion of Iraq, threatened Iran's ruling clerical stratum, as it amounted to an encirclement of the country as part of Washington's long-standing policy of containment of the Islamic Republic.

This unexpected dual-impact event confronted Tehran with serious policy dilemmas. The American removal from power of the Taliban, with whom Iran had come very close to a major military confrontation in October 1998 over the militia's killing of Iranian Consulate personnel in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i Sharif, certainly pleased President Mohammad Khatami's reformist government. It provided it with a unique opportunity to substantiate its advocacy of a 'dialogue of civilisation' in the conduct of Iran's foreign relations and to refrain from opposing America's Afghan adventure. It actively and cooperatively participated in the US-driven, UN-backed December 2001 Afghanistan Bonn Peace Conference that legitimised America's intervention and mapped out a course of post-Taliban political evolution for Afghanistan.

It backed Washington's preferred choice of Hamid Karzai – a relatively unknown but anti-Taliban Pashtun figure – to head an interim administration. Leading the Iranian delegation at the Conference was Iran's current foreign minister, Javad Zarif, who took the opportunity to convey to his American counterpart, James Dobbins, the Khatami government's willingness to open a channel of discussion with Washington to improve relations. But Zarif was ignored by the hardline administration of President George W. Bush, who instead condemned Iran as a member of the 'axis of evil' in his 2002 State of the Union speech.

Meanwhile, given the factionalised nature of the Islamic Republic's ruling clerical cluster, Bush's condemnation of the Islamic Republic as an evil actor, plus America's Afghan intervention, signalled the hegemonic position of the US for many of Khatami's hardline opponents. These elements were patronised largely by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and backed by closely associated state instruments of power, in particular the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which then as now controlled most of the levers of power. They set out to do whatever possible to make life difficult for the US in Afghanistan, without engaging in such overt actions as to provide the Bush administration with a pretext to attack Iran – something that they also applied to US-occupied Iraq.

This contrasting factional approach, more or less, defined the perimeters of Tehran's policy objectives towards US-invaded Afghanistan and how it should go about achieving them, with some adjustments as the evolving Afghan situation required.

Broadly speaking, Tehran's policy attitude towards Afghanistan evolved in pursuit of primarily three interrelated partly ideological and largely geostrategic objectives. The first has been to foster stability within Afghanistan, and back mostly the Shia segment of the Afghan population, to prevent



Afghanistan's troubles from spilling over the Iranian border, and to support a functioning state within which Iran could expand its influence. The second has been to ensure that the US and, for that matter, other competitive regional actors, most importantly Pakistan and Saudi Arabia through its strategic ties with the latter, are not in a position to threaten the Islamic Republic or undermine its national and regional security safeguards. The latter has involved Tehran's nurturing of an Iran-led Shia strategic entity stretching from Central Afghanistan to southern Lebanon. The third has been to enhance relations with Afghanistan in ways that could link up the country politically, economically and infrastructurally to Iran to whatever extent possible, and to enable the Islamic Republic to reap as much, if not more, reward as Afghanistan from the processes of the war-torn country.

To achieve these objectives, Tehran has utilised a variety of largely soft power, but also hard power when necessary, means to build bridges of influence in Afghanistan. Three areas especially deserve elaboration in this respect.

Leverage of Influence

On the political front, Tehran fully endorsed the outcome of the Bonn Peace Conference, where the Iranian delegation played a key role in persuading the friendly figures representing the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (dubbed by Islamabad as the Northern Alliance to de-emphasise its national importance to overcome their objections. Iran backed Karzai's interim, transitional and elected governments over the next fourteen years. It courted Karzai personally and fostered close relations with some members of his inner circle. Karzai himself is an ethnic Pashtun, whose two major, but historically rival, tribes – the Durrani, from which Karzai hails, and the Ghilzai, to which the Taliban and the current president Ashraf Ghani belong – form the largest minority in socially divided Afghanistan.

In deference to the Bonn Agreement and his own impulses, Karzai wanted his cabinet to reflect the diversity of the mosaic population of Afghanistan. He always included a couple of powerful Shia leaders in his cabinet to represent the 15 - 20 percent Shia segment of the Sunni-dominated people of Afghanistan. They included most prominently his Vice President and leader of *Hezb-e Wahdat Islami Afghanistan* (the Afghanistan Islamic Unity Party, Mohammed Karim Khalili, who has had close sectarian and political links to Tehran from the time of the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Karzai also deferred extensively to the most influential spiritual Shia leader, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Asif Mohseni, who until his death in August 2019 had an extensive affiliation with Tehran. Mohseni enjoyed a substantial amount of direct Iranian financial and logistic assistance to build a large seminary and educational compound of Shia learnings from primary school to university level in Kabul – all in Mashhad style – and commanded a huge Shia following.

Meanwhile, Tehran provided direct monetary assistance to Karzai in the form of frequent substantial cash payments, which complemented what the Afghan leader also used to receive from the CIA. In publicly acknowledging Tehran's donations, Karzai claimed that it was for his office expenses,²

2 Jon Boone, "Hamid Karzai Admits Office Gets 'Bags of Money' from Iran", *The Guardian*, 26 October 2010.



although some insiders have said that he used the largesse for personal and patronage building purposes. Whatever the case, Tehran managed to pierce the Karzai governments at the highest level. It had such allies within and outside the Afghan power structure who were capable of ensuring that Iran's interests were not violated in any major decisions made. While it is not possible to determine the degree of favour that Iran may have received in return, it is clear that it could not have been entirely without political benefits.

In addition, along with Khalili's group, Tehran has backed three other Shia parties as conduits of influence, all of which have stemmed from the old Tehran-supported *Hezb-e Wahdat* (the Unity Party), which consolidated in resistance to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. One of them is the *Hezb-e Wahdat Islami Mardum-e Afghanistan* (Afghan People's Islamic Unity Party), led by the powerful Mohammad Mohaqiq.

In contrast to their historical deprivation and despite the Taliban's sectarian hostility towards them, Afghanistan's Shia minority has grown to secure a sizable share in the Afghan power structure, economy, business, trade, communication and security sectors. This is not to claim that Iran controls them, but that Tehran has sought to leverage them to entrench its position as an important player on the Afghan scene.

Karzai's successor, Ashraf Ghani, has been less sanguine in the conduct of relations with Iran, and there is no report of him having received any direct cash payments. However, he has not been in a position to downgrade the role of Tehran and its conduits in Afghanistan, especially as under him Afghan politics has become increasingly ethnicised. While conscious of the popular strength of the Shia parties, he has teamed up with a prominent Shia figure, Mohammad Sarwar Danish, as his Vice President. Ghani has often pandered to the Shia leaders, as he has also to leaders of other minorities, to boost his political fortunes, especially in the face of the Taliban's rejection of his government as illegitimate and growing internal criticism of his leadership even by many of his ethnic associates.

Ghani has also proved to be very unpopular. There is a widespread public perception of him as a power manipulator and self-serving. This is at least partly rooted in his claim of victory in the September 2019 presidential elections, whose results were announced five months later amid serious electoral disputes. He was declared as the winner with less than 1 million votes out of some 8 million cast in a country of an estimated 37 million population. His leading challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, accused him of massive electoral fraud. Both contenders had been there before. The same had happened in the 2014 elections, where Abdullah rejected Ghani's claim of victory as fraudulent, and the issue was finally settled at the direct intervention by the former US Secretary of State John Kerry, who prompted them to form what became known as the National Unity Government (NUG) with Ghani assuming the presidency and Abdullah holding a new unconstitutional position as the Chief Executive. However, the NUG, which was unprecedented in the history of Afghanistan, turned out to be terribly dysfunctional, as the two men could not agree on many governing issues.



The 2019 bitter electoral dispute was finally settled in a similar fashion. When both Ghani and Abdullah declared two rival presidencies, Kerry's successor under President Donald Trump, Mike Pompeo, pressured the two and threatened to cut America's financial assistance by \$1 billion. Ghani and Abdullah finally reached another compromise, whereby the former assumed the presidency and the latter took over a new post as the Chair of the Council of National Reconciliation outside the government as a consolation prize. Although in the face of the Taliban's assertiveness, and imminent US and allied military withdrawal, the two old antagonists have found it compelling to work more cooperatively, this does not mean that Afghanistan has had anything more than a weak, divided and kleptocratic government under Ghani than was even the case under his predecessor, Karzai.

Under the circumstances, Tehran has found it expedient to play off all sides whenever appropriate in Afghanistan. Not only has it maintained good relations with the successive Afghan government and backed various Shia groups, but it also forged friendly ties with prominent receptive figures among the Sunni Dari speaking segments of the Afghan population based on cultural and linguistic affiliations. Such figures include Abdullah, the former NUG Foreign Minister Salaouddin Rabbani and before him his father, the late President Burhanuddin Rabbani, and some of their close aides. Further, as of 2016, Tehran has made a concerted effort to nurture close relations with elements of the Taliban in the expectation that the militia is set to play a determining role in Afghanistan's future trajectory. The former Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was killed by an American drone strike along the Pakistan-Iran border in May 2016, had reportedly made several visits to Iran. In more recent times, Tehran has been very vocal about its relations with the Taliban.³ It invited a Taliban delegation, headed by the group's deputy leader Mullah Ghani Baradar, for official peace talks in late January 2021.⁴ In other words, Tehran has, more or less, practised in Afghanistan what it has pursued in some of Iran's other regional neighbours – cultivating and backing receptive groups as actual or potential conduits of influence.

Another plank of Tehran's policy approach has been to participate actively in the post-Taliban reconstruction of Afghanistan. It has been one of the country's most generous donors. At the 2002 Tokyo Afghanistan donor conference, Iran pledged \$560 million for reconstruction. This was the largest of any country outside the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). "It added another \$100 million to this amount in 2006 and \$50 million in donations, plus \$300 million in loans, in 2008. It has invested heavily in infrastructure, schools, and social services, while expanding its cultural, religious, and economic ties. Between 2007 and 2013, it contributed \$50 million a year for counter-narcotics operations alone."⁵

Since 2001, Iran has grown to be Afghanistan's largest trading partner, with a balance of trade weighing heavily in Iran's favour. In March 2017-February 2018, the volume of trade between the two

3 "Afghan Taliban Chief Bought Life Insurance in Pakistan before US Drone Strike Killed Him: Report", *The Economic Times*, 13 December 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/afghan-taliban-chief-bought-life-insurance-in-pakistan-before-us-drone-strike-killed-him-report/articleshow/79706046.cms?from=mdr>.

4 "Iran Hosts Afghan Taliban Leader as Peace Talks Stalled", *Reuters*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-afghanistan-usa-idUSKBN2A00KE>.

5 Amin Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. 177 - 78.



countries was \$2 billion, but by 2020 - 2021 it had risen by 25 percent, with Iranian exports forming some 90 percent of the total.⁶ This did not include illegal trade which was reportedly estimated at \$1 billion for 2016 - 2017 alone.⁷ A large chunk of Iran's development aid has strategically been invested in projects in Afghanistan's western provinces bordering Iran. A number of these provinces' cities and regions have become dependent on Iran for electricity, fuel, and cross-border trade consisting of a variety of other goods and commodities. In sum, Iranian aid and trade with Afghanistan has become a significant lifeline for the general economic wellbeing of the area.

In view of Afghanistan's tense relations with Pakistan mainly due to Islamabad's support of the Taliban, Iran has receptively granted landlocked Afghanistan permission to use its Chahbahar port on the Gulf for transit purposes. It has funded and constructed expensive infrastructural projects, including a bridge and a major road to link Chahbahar to the Afghan border. India has partnered with Iran in this development, given its longstanding quest to bypass Pakistan for securing safe transit access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. "Afghanistan is now linked to India by a road to Chahbahar constructed between Zaranj and Delaram, a trade route that rivals the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwandar Port in Balochistan. Chahbahar symbolizes Iran's and India's shared strategic interests ... [which include] containing Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan."⁸

The first Iran-funded railway, linking the northeastern Iranian city of Khaf to Afghanistan's western city of Ghoryan over a 140km track, was launched in December 2020 at the cost of \$75 million as part of Iran's development assistance to Afghanistan. When the track is extended to the western Afghan city of Herat, "the network would help transport six million tons of goods and up to a million passengers a year."⁹ This is all in addition to many other infrastructural, educational and cultural projects and communication outlets, including TV stations, that Iran has partially or fully funded. The Islamic Republic's soft power, including the Khatami Al Anbiya, which is essentially an instrument of the powerful IRGC, and different Bonyads or ruling clerical linked charity organisations have assumed an important role in Iranian activities.¹⁰

The Iranian involvement in various forms has certainly benefited Afghanistan, but it has also enabled US-sanctioned Iran to reap substantial dividends from its investments. Iran has leveraged Afghanistan for sanction-busting purposes in a variety of ways. Not only has it sold goods to Afghanistan, most importantly oil, in exchange for dollars. It has also received estimated sums \$4-4.5 billion annually in dollars smuggled from the country.¹¹ This has occurred in different forms, one reportedly related

6 "Iran-Afghanistan Trade", *Tehran Times*, 10 April 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/tag/Iran-Afghanistan+trade>.

7 Mir Haidar Shah Omid, "Sharp Rise in Trade Volume between Afghanistan and Iran", *Tolo News*, 31 January 2017, <https://tolonews.com/business/sharp-rise-trade-volume-between-afghanistan-and-iran>.

8 Saikal, *Iran Rising*, p. 178.

9 Maysam Bizaer, "Iran's Railway Ambitions go beyond Afghanistan", *Atlantic Council*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-railway-ambitions-go-beyond-afghanistan/>.

10 For a discussion, see Mahan Abedin, "How Iran Found Its Feet in Afghanistan", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 October 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2019-10-24/how-iran-found-its-feet-afghanistan>.

11 Omar, "Dollar Smuggling from Afghanistan to Iran Surges as Tehran Lifts Import Limits", *Salaam Times*, 6 July 2020, https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2020/07/06/feature-01.



to Iranian merchants, many linked to the power structures in Iran, who have managed to exchange large amounts of Iranian riyals for dollars in Afghanistan, with their Afghan counterparts taking the riyals back to Iran to purchase products for import to Afghanistan.¹² The Afghan Finance Ministry has several times reported what it has called the flight of the dollar to Iran.¹³

While Iran-Afghanistan relations have overall been positive, they have not been free of certain challenges, some quite persistent. Disputes over water allocation and the delineation of boundaries affecting the Helmand River and the Hurrirud-Murghab basin in Afghanistan have been the source of multiple tensions since the nineteenth century. Given that both countries suffer from water shortages, this will continue to be a major point of contention. The two countries signed the Helmand River Treaty in 1973, which established a formal agreement on the division of water.¹⁴ However, the Iranian side has claimed that it has not been fully implemented. Afghanistan has planned to build twenty-one dams to boost agricultural production and produce electricity. It has accused Iran of attempting to block the Kamal Khan dam on Helmand. In 2011, a captured Taliban official claimed that he had been offered \$50,000 to sabotage the Kamal Khan dam in the Afghan province of Nimroz. The dam has nonetheless been completed and was inaugurated in March 2021, to the dismay of Tehran.

Afghanistan's many refugees have been another contentious issue. Although there is no precise figure available for the number of Afghan refugees in Iran, the country is widely believed to host some 2.5–3 million of them (a majority of them unregistered) – the second-largest number after Pakistan. Until recent years, Tehran treated the refugees quite well, giving them access to generous social security programs. However, the plight of refugees has generally deteriorated, as Iran's economic difficulties have mounted. Iran has also used the refugee issue to gain political leverage against the Afghan government whenever deemed desirable, with Tehran threatening to deport refugees en masse to Afghanistan on several occasions. A good number of refugees have been deported and repatriated in the last few years, with some also lately escaping pandemic-ravaged Iran.¹⁵

Adding to the complication of relations has also been Tehran's recruitment of Afghan refugees to fight in Syria, and Iranian border guards killing groups of Afghans who have tried to cross the border looking for work in Iran. One such incident occurred in early 2020 when Iranian guards beat and pushed at least 70 Afghans into the Hurrirud River.¹⁶

A further point of contention between the two countries concerns cross-border drug trafficking from Afghanistan, which is the largest poppy-growing and heroin-producing country in the world, into

12 Matthew Rosenberg and Annie Lowrey, "Iranian Currency Flows Into Afghanistan Markets", *New York Times*, 17 August 2012.

13 Hikmat Noori, "Is Afghanistan Helping Iran Survive US Sanctions with Dollar Smuggling", *TRTWorld*, 22 July 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/is-afghanistan-helping-iran-survive-us-sanctions-with-dollar-smuggling-28421>.

14 For its full text, see "The Helmand River Water Treaty", *Afghanistan Waters Portal*, <https://afghanwaters.net/en/the-helmand-river-water-treaty-1973/>.

15 For details, see Ezzatullah Mehrdad, "As Deportations Soar, Afghan Returnees Struggle on Home Soil", *The New Humanitarian*, 26 January 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/01/26/iran-afghanistan-migrant-returns-refugees-conflict-coronavirus-economy>.

16 "Afghanistan Says At Least 70 Migrants 'Forced into River' by Iran Border Guards", *Middle East Eye*, 3 May 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/afghanistan-says-least-70-migrants-forced-river-iran-border-guards>.



Iran. Because Afghanistan does not have sufficient security, border, and customs forces, Iran has had to deploy a substantial and costly border guard to combat drug trafficking, costing the lives of many of its security personnel over the years. Despite its efforts, Iran now has one of the largest numbers of addicts in the region, entailing huge health and social problems for the country. Tehran wants Kabul to do more to stem the flow of opiates into Iran, but the Afghan government has little capacity to do so.¹⁷

Another issue complicating Iranian-Afghan relations is Tehran's distrust of nuclear-armed Pakistan, which has a long history of intervention aimed at countering Indian influence and preventing Iran from gaining the upper hand in Afghanistan. Pakistan is a predominantly Sunni Muslim state, with Shias forming around 20 percent of its population of some 208 million. Although Tehran and Islamabad have maintained the semblance of good neighbourly relations, the Iranian side harbors serious reservations about Pakistan. It has accused Islamabad of helping and providing sanctuaries, with Saudi backing, to separatist groups, such as *Jundallah* (Soldiers of God in the Sunni-dominated Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan).

Finally, Tehran has been very unhappy about the Afghanistan-US Strategic Partnership Agreement, signed in 2012 and reaffirmed by Ghani two years later, enabling the US to have permanent military bases in Afghanistan. Kabul has defied Tehran's serious objections in this respect.¹⁸ However, with the imminent withdrawal of all foreign forces, the US has begun the process of handing over these bases to the Afghan National Security Forces. Although the Strategic Agreement will remain in place and the US will retain a residual force, involving an intelligence network, to protect its mission in Kabul and conduct counter-terrorism operations whenever required, the issue of the bases should not be a major concern for Tehran.

Iran's Stance in Relation to Post-US Afghanistan

As the United States and its NATO and non-NATO allies are scheduled to make a military exit from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021, which will also mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the question is: Where will this leave Iran in relation to a post-US Afghanistan?

It is clear that after two decades of fighting the Taliban-led armed resistance, the US and its allies have failed to achieve Washington's original promise of transforming Afghanistan into a stable, secure and prosperous country. In fact, they leave behind a broken country, as they did with Vietnam and Iraq. Ultimately, the US could neither secure a credibly reliable partner in each of these countries, nor sell its invasions to the peoples of the subjected countries and, for that matter, to its own constituency.¹⁹

¹⁷ Saikal, *Iran Rising*, p. 182.

¹⁸ Niranjan Chandrashekhar Oak, "What's between the Taliban and Iran?" *Diplomat*, 8 June 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/whats-between-the-taliban-and-iran/>.

¹⁹ Amin Saikal, "Leaving Afghanistan and Why America Doesn't Win Wars", *The Strategist*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/leaving-afghanistan-and-why-america-doesnt-win-wars/>.

The US military departure must please the ruling hardliners in Tehran. It is, after all, what they have always advocated. But since the US departure takes place without a universal ceasefire and political settlement that could lay the foundations for a lasting power-sharing arrangement between the Taliban and other warring parties, Afghanistan is at serious risk of descending into wider and deeper turmoil, prompting the country's neighbours to support different groups in pursuit of their conflicting regional interests. In the event of either this likely scenario homogenising or the Taliban gaining ascendancy, Tehran has built sufficient assets in Afghanistan to enable it to defend its interests. This is not to claim that its favoured forces will prevail whatever eventuates in Afghanistan, but it does suggest that Tehran has accumulated sufficient leverage in the country to swing events in its direction to whatever extent possible and desirable. In other words, if it is not a party to a lasting resolution of the Afghanistan predicament, it will always be in a position to wreck it in order to disadvantage its adversaries in Afghanistan and the region.

As in all its foreign policy actions, the Islamic regime has often been remarkably more pragmatic than ideological when it comes to the self-preservation and defence of Iran in the context of changing regional and global circumstances. In relation to Afghanistan, it has been there before following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and has ploughed its way through the long years of US and allied intervention in the country. One should not underestimate its potential this time to work closely with Russia, China and India to make sure that its regional geopolitical interests are protected irrespective of whatever direction Afghanistan may take. It is not going to be easy, but whatever its internal and external problems, the Islamic regime has repeatedly proved to be resilient.