

# MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

## OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES



SPRING  
2005

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## **A Troubled Triangle: Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan in Strategic Perspective**

### **Introduction**

*Haleh Esfandiari, Director, Middle East Program*  
Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan can be characterized as three neighbors each following their own agendas. In the quarter-century since the Islamic Republic came to power in Iran, the countries have been going through relationship phases that can be referred to at best as not so smooth—if not hostile at times. Iran shares more than 500 miles of its border with each Afghanistan and Pakistan. The populations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan are comprised of a Sunni majority and Shiite minority. As the only Shiite country in this Troubled Triangle, Iran is compelled to react to events affecting Shiites in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In 1997, when the Hazaras were massacred and a number of Iranian diplomats were killed

in Mazar-i Sharif, Iran amassed its troops at the border with Afghanistan. It took a great deal of effort and diplomacy to diffuse the tension between the two countries. While Pakistan had relations with and condoned the actions of the Taliban, Iran condemned the Taliban's treatment of women and the excesses that were perpetrated under the name of Islam. Iran supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and later established close contacts with Isma'il Khan, the post-Taliban governor of Herat. Iran's relations with Pakistan have been both bumpy and intimate. Iran's ability to buy nuclear facilities from Pakistan attests to a closeness of relations between influential elements in both governments. Meanwhile, Pakistan's close relationship with the U.S. has created much concern among the Iranian leadership.

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This publication was made possible through a grant from the Ford Foundation and the support of the Open Society Institute.

## About the Middle East Program

The Middle East Program was launched in February 1998 in light of increased U.S. engagement and the profound changes sweeping across many Middle Eastern states. In addition to spotlighting day-to-day issues, the Program continues to concentrate on long-term developments and their impact on political and social structure, economic development, and relations with the United States.

The Middle East Program draws on domestic and foreign regional experts for its meetings, conferences, and occasional papers. Conferences and meetings assess the policy implications of long-term political, social, and economic developments in the region and individual states; the Middle East's role in the international arena; American interests in the region; the threat of terrorism; and strategic threats to and from the regional states.

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- **Gender Issues:** The Middle East Program examines employment patterns, education, legal rights, and political participation of women in the region. The role of women in advancing civil society, the problem of trafficking in women, and the attitudes of governments and the clerical community toward women's rights are areas to which the Program devotes considerable attention. The Program also has a keen interest in exploring women's increasing roles in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction activities.
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**Special thanks to:** Jillian Frumkin for coordinating this publication; Julia Bennett and Evan Hensleigh for their editing assistance; and Lianne Hepler for designing the Occasional Paper Series. **Photos by David Hawxhurst.**

As part of an ongoing series on Iranian foreign policy toward its eastern neighbors, the Middle East and Asia Programs of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars hosted a meeting on April 24, 2005 entitled "A Troubled Triangle: Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan in Strategic Perspective." At this meeting, co-sponsored with the Aschiana Foundation, speakers analyzed how Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan evaluate each other from a strategic standpoint. Three experts in the field, Larry P. Goodson, Ayesha Siddiq, and Vali Nasr, spoke at the Wilson Center and addressed relations between these countries.

Larry P. Goodson referred to Afghanistan as a place where superpowers of the 19th century, Britain and Russia, and now Iran and Pakistan, play out their strategic rivalries. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan and Iran strove to influence various warring factions in the country. [See the website of the Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project for a summary of the event, "Towards a International History of the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan 1980-1989" [www.wilsoncenter.org/cwihp](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/cwihp)]. Dr. Goodson discussed how the events of 9/11 provoked the U.S. to become involved directly in the region by overthrowing the Taliban and forging a strategic alliance with Pakistan, leaving Iran out of the equation. He noted that President Hamid Karzai's Afghan government has tried to diffuse the tension by reaching out to Iran and Pakistan. It is easier for Afghanistan to foster a close relationship with Pakistan than with Iran, Dr. Goodson explained, since such cooperation is blessed by the U.S. On the other hand, Dr. Goodson noted that Karzai needs Iran's cooperation for economic development and political stability.

Ayesha Siddiq called the relations between the three countries "uneasy" and "difficult." Putting this relationship in a historical context, she explained Pakistan's desire to be the dominant Islamic and strategically secure country in the region. She described relations between Pakistan and Iran under the Iranian monarchy as very close, noting that Iran even helped Pakistan with technical assistance during the



1965 Indo-Pakistani War with India. Dr. Siddiqi argued that as Pakistan's interests in Central Asia grew, Pakistan distanced itself from Iran and established closer ties with Afghanistan. Since 9/11, Pakistan and the U.S. have had close ties, and Pakistan has embraced a continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Pakistan has strongly opposed any military intervention against Iran, lest it lead to destabilization in the region. Dr. Siddiqi emphasized the importance of considering relations between the neighbors in the context of external foreign powers' influence on the region.

Dr. Nasr talked about the Iranian perspective vis-à-vis Pakistan and Afghanistan, arguing that throughout the 1980s, an alliance was forged between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to build a "Sunni wall" that would limit Iran's influence on the Shiite populations of its neighboring countries. After 9/11, he said, Iran's objectives included ensuring that the "Sunni wall" was dismantled, gaining influence in Afghanistan once the Taliban was defeated, and rekindling a dialogue with Washington based on cooperation in

Afghanistan. Dr. Nasr explained that Iran would benefit from a stable Afghanistan and a central government that can control the flow of drugs into Iran and entice Afghan refugees in Iran to return to Afghanistan. Dr. Nasr also noted that Iran is concerned about the ever-growing rapprochement between the U.S. and Pakistan's government, particularly regarding the possibility of U.S. military bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan—especially in southern Baluchistan. The most contentious issues between Iran and Pakistan are the development of Iran's nuclear energy and Pakistan's involvement through A.Q. Khan, as well as Iran's recent rapprochement with India.

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Many thanks to Robert Hathaway, Director of the Asia Program, his wonderful colleagues, and especially Wilson Lee, who was the driving force behind putting this meeting together. Many thanks also to the Middle East Program's Associate, Jillian Frumkin, and Assistant, Julia Bennett, for their organizational skills and work on this publication. Finally, thanks to the Middle East Program's intern, Evan Hensleigh, for his programming assistance.

## Afghanistan: Crossroads of a Troubled Region

By **Larry P. Goodson**, Professor of Middle East Studies, U.S. Army War College



Larry P. Goodson

Afghanistan's status as a regional actor has always been a mixture of hinterland, buffer state, and crossroads, often all at the same time. Indeed, Afghanistan was always considered the land beyond the "back of beyond." As a hinterland, its rugged terrain and geographical position in the heart of inner Asia made it remote. This was especially so following the decline of the Mongol Empire and the opening of sea lanes of economic transport in the 16th century, which reduced the importance of arduous overland trade via the historic Silk Road. Afghanistan's increasing remoteness in the 19th and 20th centuries contributed to its lack of economic development upon independence in 1919 and in the decades that followed.

As a buffer state, Afghanistan stood between expansionist Russian and British empires during the 19th century "Great Game," and then between their successors in the 20th century, the Soviet Union and the United States, who competed for Afghanistan's affections and influence through aid and diplomacy. Afghanistan has also become a place where Pakistan and Iran's own geopolitical ambitions and rivalries could play out. Each country has long sought to thwart the other, and their rivalry grew increasingly problematic with the demise of the Soviet Union and the desires of both countries to expand their influence in the region through Afghanistan.

It is as a crossroads that Afghanistan has its most enduring status, captured romantically in modern imagination as a southern hub of the ancient Silk Road. Indeed, while Afghanistan has always been a place through which commerce passed, it has also been a highway for some of history's most celebrated military leaders and their armies, from Alexander to Genghis Khan to Tamerlane to the founders of the Moghul Dynasty in India. In the modern era, Afghanistan has continued to be shaped, despite its forbidding terrain, by the armies and traded goods that pass across its borders, whether the Soviet Army in 1979 or

the burgeoning heroin traffic some 25 years later. As a crossroads, Afghanistan is also the linchpin of Asia, tying together Central Asia, Southwest Asia, and South Asia, and linking Persian, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, Russian, and Turkic cultures.

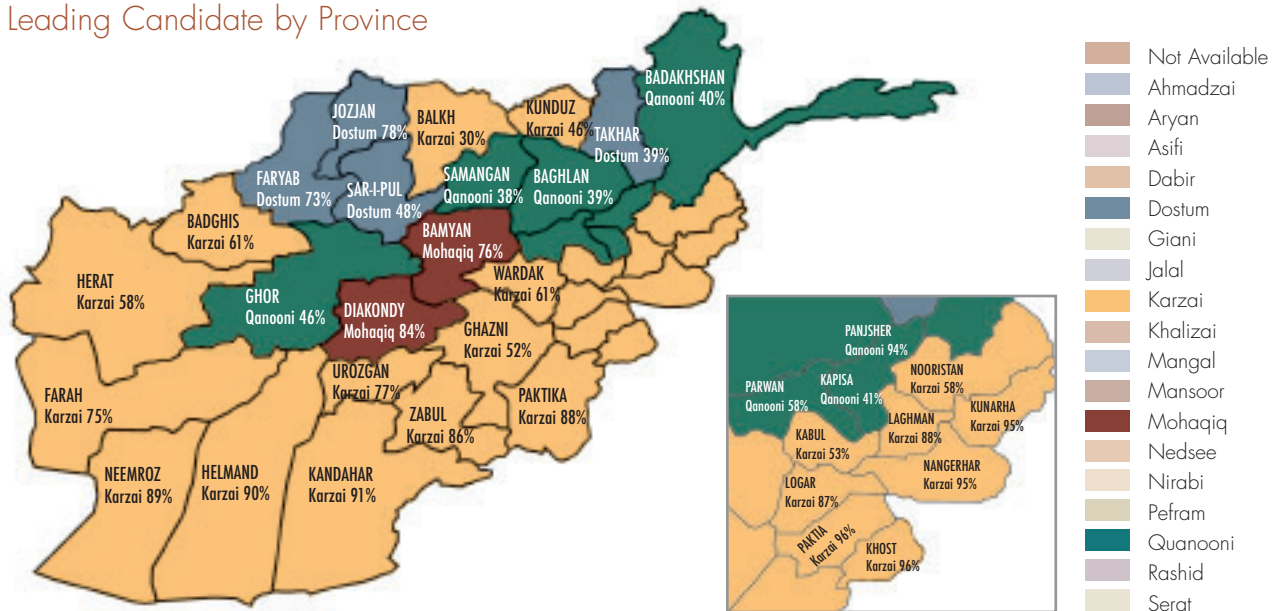
### Modern History

The events of the last quarter-century opened Afghanistan up to substantial outside influences yet again. This time, the country has been transformed by full-scale invasion and occupation by Russian and Central Asian military forces with alien socio-economic-political systems; a concomitant refugee flow that regionalized the Afghanistan problem; cross-border insurgency out of Pakistan, and less so Iran; and a subsequent sense by Afghanistan's neighbors that their continued meddling in Afghanistan's affairs was warranted and necessary after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union just three years after its withdrawal from Afghanistan opened up the prospects of trade with Central Asia, a region long closed to its southern neighbors—which fully re-energized Afghanistan's crossroads status again. Yet, Afghanistan's renewed regional centrality also emboldened its neighbors, freed from the long Soviet shadow at last, to begin using Afghanistan as a convenient backyard for their regional geopolitical aspirations.

Thus, during the 1990s through late 2001, as the country convulsed in a long civil war fought by internal militias who were proxy armies for regional rivals, legal trade through Afghanistan languished while illegal smuggling and the drug traffic grew. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i Islami and later the Taliban were supported by Pakistan. The Hazara party Hezb-i Wahdat was supported by Iran. Rashid Dostum's Uzbek militia Jumbish-i-Milli was supported by Russia and Uzbekistan. The Tajik-dominated Shura-i-Nazar of Ahmad Shah Massoud was supported

## AFGHANISTAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS RESULTS - 2004

### Leading Candidate by Province



Source: <http://www.elections-afghanistan.org.af/Election%20Results%20Website/english/english.htm>

by Iran, Russia, India, and other regional actors. Much of this regional geopolitical meddling was made possible by American disengagement following the Soviet withdrawal, proving that whatever Afghanistan was to its regional neighbors, to much of the world it remained a backwater, or hinterland, still.

September 11, 2001 changed the strategic calculus concerning Afghanistan and its neighbors, and importantly, the change in the calculus began in Washington. Prior to 9/11, Washington had limited influence in the Troubled Triangle of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, as it had undergone diplomatic disengagement with all three countries. The United States has had a troubled relationship with Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which led to a suspension of diplomatic relations by the U.S. in 1980 and extensive economic sanctions. Iran's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and known links to Islamist terrorist groups led to a further deterioration following 9/11, and Iran was listed as a member of the "Axis of Evil" by President George W. Bush in January 2002. The U.S. also had no diplomatic relations with the Taliban government in Afghanistan and had imposed sanctions there in 1999 over the Taliban's refusal to hand over Al-Qa'ida terrorist master-

mind Osama bin Laden. While the U.S. did have diplomatic relations with Pakistan on 9/11, official disapproval of the military coup that brought General Pervez Musharraf to power was issued in October 1999 and further strained what were already very cool relations, due to Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998. Sanctions on Pakistan had been imposed by the U.S. in 1998 and were strengthened following the military takeover in 1999.

September 11, 2001 caused the United States to see the world in terms of the Global War on Terrorism threat, prompting a fundamental change to its policy of trying to contain and isolate that threat in the Troubled Triangle. A full re-engagement with Afghanistan was facilitated initially through a military effort to topple the Taliban, as well as with some quiet back-channel cooperation with Iran to produce the Bonn Accords, which would provide the foundation for the subsequent successful political transformation of Afghanistan. American engagement with Iran was short-lived, as neo-conservative voices grew dominant within the U.S. foreign policy community. Iran's geographic position and Pakistan's role as a patron of the Taliban made rehabilitating the floundering relationship with Pakistan an urgent American priority; and the "You're either with

## Notes

1. President George W. Bush, in an Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People on September 20, 2001. [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20010920-8.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20010920-8.html)

us or against us in the fight against terrorism” message of President Bush forced his counterpart in Pakistan to choose the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, the U.S. needed access to northern Afghanistan and thus rapidly strengthened ties and developed military bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Suddenly, Afghanistan became the center of a web of American and international attention, which came just in time, as the Taliban and Al-Qa’ida were preparing for a final solution to the northern minorities problem.

The Afghanistan that the U.S. and international community re-discovered following 9/11 was a wasteland, destroyed utterly by the quarter-century of comprehensive war. This reality meant that Afghanistan had to have another, hopefully temporary, status—that of ward of the U.S. and international community. Thus, Afghanistan’s foreign relations since the fall of the Taliban have been primarily shaped by its position as a ward of the international community, particularly of the United States. Although Afghan President Hamid Karzai has made multiple state visits to both


## The Triangle Today

The current situation in the region is that the U.S.—which has become an increasingly confident and engaged, although still somewhat reluctant, hegemonic actor—shapes each country’s strategic calculus toward the other. Although Iran has managed to strengthen its commercial influence in western Afghanistan substantially, regional meddling in Afghan affairs has been significantly constrained. Operating under Washington’s strategic umbrella, Karzai now has a window of opportunity to re-develop the Afghan state without the overweening involvement of meddling neighbors. The son of a prominent Pushtun tribal leader, Karzai is acceptable to Pakistan, which wants a return on its prolonged and sizeable investment in Afghanistan. Karzai has also taken care to placate Iranian interests to some extent, but buoyed by his close friendship with Washington, mostly he has concentrated on the enormous job of rebuilding the Afghanistan state and society. Afghanistan has reabsorbed over two million refugees in the last three years, reducing the Iranian and Pakistani refugee burdens. Important trade links through western Afghanistan have reopened, and Iranian commercial initiatives are benefiting from the development of the most rehabilitated road network in Afghanistan by trucking significant consumer goods into Afghanistan and on into Pakistan. Deals for electricity supply in western Afghanistan now exist with both Iran and Turkmenistan.

Afghanistan’s major imperative with Pakistan is the ongoing support the Taliban continue to enjoy in that country, especially in those Pakistani provinces and areas adjoining Afghanistan, such as Baluchistan, the North-West Frontier Province, and the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies, or FATA. Much effort has been expended on altering that supportive relationship, as Afghanistan’s 2,250-kilometer border with Pakistan remains disputed and highly porous, traversing some of the most rugged and remote terrain on the planet. A Tripartite Commission of military and diplomatic officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States was established in 2003 to

Operating under Washington’s strategic umbrella, Karzai now has a window of opportunity to re-develop the Afghan state without the overweening involvement of meddling neighbors.

Pakistan and Iran since 2002, his major foreign trips continue to be to the U.S. The international community has also deepened its involvement in Afghanistan, most notably with the growing role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in running the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) there and expanding its control from Kabul into the northeastern and north-central parts of the country.



expand security cooperation between the three countries. The Commission has since met more than ten times, stabilizing border problems between Pakistan and Afghanistan and playing an important role in facilitating Pakistan's unprecedented security cooperation in the FATA, where Washington continues to believe that senior Al-Qa'ida leaders are holed up. In 2004, the Pakistani Army deployed 70,000 troops into the FATA, primarily into the South Waziristan Agency, in cooperation with American-led operations on the Afghan side of the border. Similar operations are planned for 2005. The U.S. has played a key role on the Tripartite Commission, especially in the Global War on Terrorism context, as U.S. commander in Afghanistan Lieutenant General David Barno is also a regional commander responsible for Pakistan and parts of Central Asia and chair of the Tripartite Commission. There will be a change in both the military command (Barno is scheduled to be replaced by Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry in May 2005) and diplomatic leadership (U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad is leaving Afghanistan to become U.S. ambassador to Iraq), which may alter the geo-strategic situation profoundly.<sup>2</sup>

Afghanistan still faces major challenges, and there remain long-term concerns in the region about its prospects for stability, which is essential if it is to be the hub of regional trade and not of regional unrest. These challenges are interlinked and include the persistence of an anti-government, anti-Western insurgency (which continues to enjoy ongoing popular support in Pakistan); the continuing presence of warlord-led militias and the role they might play in complicated parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2005; and the disturbing boom of the narcotics economy. Significant ethnic (Pushtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek), linguistic (Dari, Pushtun), sectarian (Sunni, Shi'a), and regional divisions (most of the aforementioned groups overlap into neighboring countries, and have been clients of those states in the past) persist and may resurface in the parliamentary electoral process. The ethnic

breakdown of the October 2004 presidential election results suggests that ethnicity and allegiance to local warlords may be important factors in the September 2005 parliamentary elections. Afghanistan's one major product, opium, is now an important if illegal pillar of its economy, making Afghanistan the hub of a regional and global heroin network that provides almost 90% of the world's heroin supply. Deep rural poverty in Afghanistan combines with corruption among the police, customs officials, and soldiers in all the regional countries to undercut significant official efforts to crack down on this trade. The outcome of this struggle is still up in the air, as are the efforts of the Afghan government to revive the Trans-Afghan Pipeline (TAP) project to run an 850-kilometer pipeline from the gas fields of Turkmenistan through western Afghanistan to Pakistan, and eventually onwards to the burgeoning consumer market in India. Still, whether through licit or illicit trade, Afghanistan's long-term economic hopes are pinned firmly on the revival of its status as the crossroads of Asia.

Thus, the major geo-strategic consideration for all the countries in the region, but especially Afghanistan, concerns the length of the U.S. commitment there. There is acute recognition that American disengagement in the 1990s led to the destruction of Afghanistan through the competitive meddling of its neighbors, and many fear that a resumption of such meddling is likely in the absence of a robust American engagement. The U.S. must help rebuild necessary infrastructure for Afghanistan to regain its crossroads status and to continue to stifle the interventionist impulses of its neighbors. Washington's willingness to remain engaged in the region speeds the rebirth of Afghanistan, strengthens Pakistan's effort to avoid state failure, and may eventually pave the way for renewed relations with Iran. If Washington loses interest again, however, Afghanistan may become a crossroads of narco-terrorism and regional instability. The geo-strategic interests for the U.S. in the Troubled Triangle remain vital.

2. Many knowledgeable observers consider the most powerful man in Afghanistan to be outgoing American Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, with his deep and (after November 2003) generous pockets, while the American commander for the past two years in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. David Barno, is, in a country full of warlords, the biggest warlord on the block. While Barno's replacement, Eikenberry, is on the way, a new U.S. ambassador has not yet been named. Khalilzad's unusual access to the White House (he is also a Presidential Envoy who is close to President Bush) and to the Afghan leadership (he is Afghan-American and knows much of the current Afghan leadership from his childhood days) make him unique and difficult to replace.

## Pakistan-Iran-Afghanistan Relations: Looking Beyond the Troubled Triangle

By **Ayesha Siddiq**, Pakistan Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; Visiting Fellow, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad; Correspondent, *Jane's Defence Weekly*



Ayesha Siddiq

Since the 1990s, there has been much discussion about the uneasy relations between Pakistan and Iran, and the equally difficult to define relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In fact, the phrase Troubled Triangle suggests the presence of a geo-politically unstable “critical core,” the security of which might have regional and extra-regional geo-strategic implications. The independent sets of bilateral relations between the three countries have not expanded into a trilateral framework in which any of the three countries could smoothly manage relations amongst the others. The inability to undertake a paradigm shift relates to the geo-strategic development in the region after the 1980s. Contrary to the view that the bilateral relations are “troubled,” my perception is that bilateral relations are tense due to divergent policies. However, the shared and divergent interests would not allow relations between the three neighbors to deteriorate to a point of hostility. There are shared values and common interests that would allow these countries to contribute positively towards each other’s security.


The existing analysis tends to see Pakistan-Iran relations largely in the context of the developments in Afghanistan. The Pakistan-Iran confrontation over the political future of Afghanistan, especially during the 1990s after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Kabul and the end of the Cold War, has been the centerpiece of analysis. However, Pakistan’s relations with Iran and Afghanistan need to be analyzed in a historic framework rather than in a post-December 1979 context. Furthermore, while India plays an important role, the changes in Pakistan’s Iran and Afghanistan policies were driven by other objectives as well. Islamabad’s desire for a leadership role in the region, especially in the context of the Muslim world and the evolu-

tion of its foreign and security policies from dependence to independence, is a helpful context in which to analyze these bilateral relations. Finally, the two sets of relations ought to be analyzed in a three-dimensional context including: (a) the progression of Pakistan’s security and foreign policies; (b) a hexagonal framework; and (c) the issue of religious identity.

### Pakistan’s Security and Foreign Policies

One of the key arguments of this paper is that Pakistan’s relations with Iran and Afghanistan go beyond the linear Pakistan-India framework. Surely, this is a significant parameter. Traditionally, India enjoyed good ties with Iran and Afghanistan. The relations between Kabul and New Delhi date back to 1947 and before. Kabul was always considered hostile to Pakistan, and this is what Islamabad sought to change through its two decades of involvement in Afghanistan. Driven by its military objectives, Pakistan’s main concern after the departure of Soviet forces and American assistance was to structure Afghanistan’s politics in such a manner that it would cease to be a threat to or have the ability to collaborate against Pakistan. The support provided to the various warlords, and later the Taliban, established Pakistan’s stakes in Kabul. While 9/11 changed the strategic environment, it did not diminish Islamabad’s interests or capacity to affect Afghanistan’s internal politics. Pakistan’s influence would certainly be difficult to counter, even with India’s growing relations with Kabul. Although Islamabad is deeply upset about India’s bid to re-establish itself in Pakistan’s west—the apprehension is that this would be used to destabilize Pakistan—there are limits to New Delhi’s influence in Kabul. This factor needs to be taken into consideration.





Similarly, there is concern regarding Iran-India relations. The development of the seaport in Chahbahar, Iran with New Delhi's assistance is seen as challenging Pakistan's geo-strategic interests and Islamabad's own development of the port at Gwadar. The relations between the three countries at a bilateral level must be seen in the broader perspective of the evolution of Pakistan's security and foreign policies moving from dependence to independence or from infancy to adolescence.

Pakistan-Iran relations can be divided into two phases: 1954–78 and 1978–2001 and beyond. The joint membership of the U.S.-sponsored CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), creation of the regional network (RCD), and military cooperation between the two countries was the hallmark of the first period. Iran came to Pakistan's help during the 1965 war and provided gunship helicopters that were used against Baluch insurgents in the mid-1970s. This was the heyday of the friendly bilateral links between the two neighbors.

The heyday of Pakistan-Iran relations also marked a turning point. Former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's ambition of turning Pakistan into the leader of the Muslim world, and his ability to communicate with Kabul, reduced Tehran's political significance for Islamabad. Moreover, Bhutto was interested in the leadership role himself. Islamabad was gradually growing to have a sense of its own geo-political significance. The first Afghan war of the 1980s bolstered Pakistan's confidence. A lot of people in responsible positions considered Pakistan's role as significant in causing the "death" of the Eastern superpower. This perception was certainly popular in the armed forces and other strategic organizations.

The 1980s and the 1990s were two decades in which Islamabad established its interests in Afghanistan and its political system. Afghanistan was far more relevant in terms of pursuing Islamabad's goals with West and Central Asia. The idea of Pakistan leading a Muslim block, which is attributed to General Zia-ul-Haq, did not become dormant in the ensuing years after his sudden death in 1988.

### The Hexagonal Framework

The Troubled Triangle can also be analyzed at another level: in the context of a hexagonal relationship including Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, U.S., India, and Russia. Pakistan-Iran or Pakistan-Afghanistan relations were never independent of the impact of the policies of these other players. These states have stakes in the region and their physical presence or expression of interest in the region tends to impact relations within the Troubled Triangle.

The Troubled Triangle can also be analyzed at another level: in the context of a hexagonal relationship including Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, U.S., India, and Russia.

This is truly a multi-layered relationship between the three neighbors, each affected by the other states' bilateral links with other countries. The U.S. is an active player in the region. Washington's tensions with Tehran and its physical presence in Afghanistan have bearings on Pakistan's relations with its neighbors, especially when Islamabad is viewed as a proponent of American policies encouraging Washington to prolong its stay in the region. American forces, indeed, are external to the region, and their presence causes geo-political instability at a certain level. However, Islamabad is keen to have the U.S. prolong its stay in Afghanistan. Pakistan's relations with the U.S. are central to the present debate. There is inherent tension in Iran-Pakistan ties due to Islamabad's relations with the U.S. While Islamabad sees some strategic dividends in its relations with the U.S., it also depends on conflict in the wider Asian region to keep Washington engaged. Having been "let down" by the U.S., at least five times, as some Pakistani analysts suggest, Islamabad is not keen for a repetition of this experience.

## Replacing a communist-socialist-nationalist leadership with a rabidly religious force was part of the policy to deepen Islamabad's control over Afghanistan and the adjoining Central Asia.

Similarly, American presence and policies impact Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The U.S. policy during the 1980s opened up Afghanistan for Pakistan. The almost client-patron relationship that had emerged between Islamabad and Kabul during the 1990s was a manifestation of the American policy of the 1980s and then of the 1990s when the U.S. left Kabul in the hands of regional actors. Replacing a communist-socialist-nationalist leadership with a rabidly religious force was part of the policy to deepen Islamabad's control over Afghanistan and the adjoining Central Asia. It was truly a military approach to solving the problem of the lack of stability and central authority in Afghanistan. In some respects, the strategy was colonial in nature. It was hoped that a centrally controlled and more unified Afghanistan could pave the way for Islamabad to explore or exploit the resources of central Asia. Peace in Afghanistan was essential for exploiting a resource-rich region.


Post-9/11 Afghanistan is less easy to maneuver. Moreover, there is American presence that matters a lot in terms of providing stability to Afghanistan and the region. Stability in Afghanistan is a long-term game, and it is worth assessing how long the U.S. will sustain its interest in the country. Would this interest be long enough to stabilize Afghanistan to a degree that its neighbors could use it as a source of energy supply? It appears that Afghanistan is favored by the U.S. as an option; U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently warned India and Pakistan against a gas pipeline project with

Iran. It goes without saying the Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan pipeline would strengthen ties between the three regional countries, as well as contribute tremendously towards improving India-Pakistan relations. While India remains keen to pursue the project, Islamabad, it is feared, might not withstand Washington's pressure.

### Religious Identity

Finally, relations between the three countries must be seen in another context: their divergent and shared domestic political and social identities. What does one make of the Sunni-Shiite divide? Or the political divide between the Pushtuns and Hazaras or other ethnic groups? Indubitably, the sectarian divide has been extremely bothersome. Since the early 1980s violence in Pakistan has cost the lives of hundreds of Sunnis and Shiites. In fact, a few Iranian diplomats were also targeted. This, according to some senior Pakistani officials, was the ramification of the Iran-Iraq War having been fought on Pakistan's territory. The increasing influence of Saudi-sponsored Wahabi Islam plays a significant role in this violence. Such financial and ideological investment over the past 10–15 years has certainly created tension between the Sunni majority and Shiite minority populations. The limited numbers of Shiites could be maneuvered to impact Pakistan's domestic politics. However, it is also a fact that this divide has not stopped these people from cooperating during a war in Afghanistan. Militants from both sides of the sectarian divide fought their battles together. Moreover, it is difficult to ignore the fact that Pakistani Shiites are an influential group in the country whose members are part of the decision-making nexus.

The bilateral relations are indeed sour on this account, but relations transcend across sectarian or nation-state identity issues as well. My proposition is that while Iran-Pakistan relations have been tense, and national interests have made the countries pursue differing objectives, the larger Muslim identity still has some relevance. So, while the Pakistanis would



get upset about the Iranian government disclosing the links between Pakistani scientists and Iran's nuclear program, there might not necessarily be a fear of an immediate threat from Tehran. Afghanistan surely is a problem area, but this remains a manageable issue. A nuclear Iran might not necessarily pose as a matter of concern in Islamabad. However, there is a counter argument as well. A number of Pakistani analysts have looked at the issue of Islamabad's possible nuclear proliferation links with Iran and castigated the possibility as shortsightedness and contrary to the Westphalian nation-state and national interest paradigm. The argument is that Islamabad cannot really afford to have another nuclear state in its immediate neighborhood. However, such an argument needs to be unpacked and analyzed more carefully in the context of a larger identity of the three as neighboring Muslim states.

How bilateral relations between Pakistan and Iran and Pakistan and Afghanistan develop

depends on a number of issues highlighted earlier. The relations should be seen in a broader context rather than a narrow trilateral paradigm. The three neighbors remain highly relevant for each other's security despite the fact that they are willing to pursue independent political and socioeconomic development trajectories. Afghanistan's stability is of interest to Pakistan and other actors as well. However, the region lacks the potential to guarantee stability in Afghanistan. The international force, hence, is a good short-to-medium-term alternative that would limit Islamabad's immediate concerns regarding its own security and the geo-strategic balance on its western border. However, this approach is less comfortable in the context of Iran because it is really the U.S. presence that makes Afghanistan strategically significant for Tehran. Ultimately, it is the tension with the U.S. that is likely to determine the course of relations between Pakistan and Iran.

## Iran's Strategic Perspective on Afghanistan and Pakistan

**Vali Nasr**, Associate Chair of Research and Professor, Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Post-Graduate School



Robert Hathaway, Director of the Asia Program at the Wilson Center; Vali Nasr

Over the course of the past four years, Iran's strategic perspective on its eastern frontier has undergone significant change. As the Global War on Terrorism has altered the political landscape of both Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iran faces new strategic realities that present both opportunities and challenges.

### The Legacy of the 1990s

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980, Iran became host to some two million Afghan refugees—one of the largest refugee populations at the time. Many of the refugees became integrated into the Iranian labor market, and others were cared for by Iran without support from the international community. The refugee issue—and especially the fact that the refugees included Persian speaking and Shi'a Afghans—created vested interest in the resolution of the Afghan war in Tehran. That interest became more pronounced with the rise of the anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian Taliban, whose massacre of Shi'as in Mazar-i Sharif and Bamiyan in 1997–98 and the execution of Iranian journalists and diplomats in 1997 led to the mobilization of some 200,000 Iranian troops on the Afghan border. Throughout the Afghan war, Iran had supported various Afghan factions, including the Shi'a Hazara party Hezb-i Wahdat and Isma'il Khan of Herat's militia. After the rise of the Taliban, Iran more forcefully threw its weight behind the Northern Alliance.

In the 1980s, Iran's revolutionary leaders looked to Pakistan's Shi'a population—which constitutes 15–25% of the population—as a target for exporting their ideology and revolution. The prospects of greater Shi'a activism in Pakistan provoked a response from Iraq and Saudi Arabia. As a result, Shi'a-Sunni rivalry in Pakistan—the former supported by Iran and the latter by Saudi Arabia and Iraq—quickly became an extension of the Iran-Iraq War and


the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for control of the Persian Gulf. The Pakistani government, wary of Iranian interference and Shi'a restlessness, and the country's strong Sunni Islamic forces took the side of Saudi Arabia and endorsed its containment strategy. What emerged was a strong strategic tie between Riyadh and Islamabad, which would then extend to Kabul after the rise of the Taliban. This alliance was strongly anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian. Saudi Arabia's aim here was to create a "Sunni wall" from Pakistan north through Afghanistan and into Central Asia.

As a result, for much of the decade preceding September 11, 2001, Iran's strategic perspective regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan was determined by its reaction to the Saudi-Pakistani-Taliban condominium. The success of Saudi Arabia in creating and managing the "Sunni wall" accounts for Iran's tilt toward India in the 1990s and its strong backing of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.

### Iran's Strategic Perspective After September 11

Events of September 11, 2001 brought the anti-Iran Sunni alliance into America's crosshairs. The alliance that had received Washington's tacit support to contain Iran was now viewed as the source of the greatest terrorist challenge to the U.S. With the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan's shift to support the Global War on Terrorism, and tensions in relations between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, Iran found new opportunities on its eastern frontier. With the "Sunni wall" gone, Iran found new room to maneuver.

Iran's initial reaction was to support the fall of the Taliban. Tehran's objective here was first to roll-back the Sunni militancy that had limited Iran's influence in Afghanistan. Second, Iran's leaders hoped that the vacuum left in Afghanistan after the fall of Taliban would



allow Iran to expand its sphere of influence in western Afghanistan. Third, Iran hoped that Afghanistan would serve as the context for a rapprochement with Washington.

Iran was able to achieve its first two objectives. Operation Enduring Freedom completely destroyed the Taliban. It also created a vacuum in which Iran's economic ties with Herat were strengthened. Freed from the menace of the Taliban, Isma'il Khan returned from exile to form the government in Herat, which was closely aligned with Iran and quickly gained power. More important, the city's economy was more tightly integrated into that of Iran's Khorasan province. Herat's bazaars were filled with Iranian goods that came to the city on Iranian trucks and on roads built by Iran—which were far better developed than those connecting the city to the rest of Afghanistan. The road development was financed by Iranian foundations, notably the Foundation of the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashad, and its pace and scope far exceeded international economic reconstruction projects in Afghanistan at the time. Those goods were bought by labor remittances from Afghans working in Iran. Iran had lost Herat in the 19th century. In October 2001, Herat was far more tightly connected to Iran's road network and economic infrastructure than it was to the rest of Afghanistan. The collapse of the Taliban for all practical purposes extended Iran's cultural and economic, if not political, boundaries into western Afghanistan. Economic ties between Herat and Khorasan, more than government strategy, has driven Iran's Afghan policy. Moreover, the case of Herat introduced a new approach to regional exercise of power to Iranian foreign policy: economic influence in lieu of political expansionism.

Iran's third objective never materialized. Iranians found the U.S. to be in no mood to mend fences with Iran; in fact, the U.S. was buoyed by its victory in Afghanistan and became keen to challenge Tehran's policies. This realization changed Iran's strategic objectives in Afghanistan. Iran began to view long-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan, a pro-American government in Kabul, and more

generally a centralized Afghan state as strategic threats. These fears became only more intense after Isma'il Khan was removed from power in 2004 and reports surfaced that the U.S. may use an airbase in western Afghanistan for operations against Iran. Since 2001, Tehran has vested its interests in local power brokers and warlords, and has remained distant from the government in Kabul.

However, Iran has also been wary of instability in Afghanistan. The Iranian population is concerned with the flow of refugees from Afghanistan and the impact of chaos on Iran's interests. Local merchants in eastern Iran have benefited from the trade that stability in Herat

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and Kabul has brought about, and hence they are eager to maintain order. The heroin trade has been a source of great concern for Iran. Heroin is transported through Iran both from the north, through Turkmenistan, and the south, through Pakistan's Baluchistan province, before it finds its way onto ferries in the Persian Gulf. The trade has produced a drug economy in Iran, increased drug addiction within Iran, and also impacted law and order along Iran's borders. Collapse of order in Afghanistan is likely to increase the scope of the traffic in narcotics. As a result, stability is at the heart of Iran's strategic interests in Afghanistan. Iran would like order in Afghanistan, but not an *American order*.

Pakistan presents Iran with a different set of interests and challenges. Since the 1990s, Iran has ceased to look at Pakistan as a strategic partner. Iran's economic and regional interests

now lie with India, and Iran for some time now has denied support to Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. Iran has also welcomed the weakening of Sunni militancy and Saudi influence in Pakistan. However, Iran is keen that Pakistan does not become too closely tied with the U.S. As a result, Iran has viewed the regime of President Pervez Musharraf as a strategic threat. Tehran's desire to dampen U.S. enthusiasm for Musharraf was reflected in Tehran's claim in 2002–03 that most of the Al-Qa'ida activists arrested in Iran were dumped on the border by Pakistani intelligence, and at times were accompanied by their handlers. More recently, Pakistanis have accused Iran of being unnecessarily cooperative with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the ties between its nuclear energy program and the A.Q. Khan network.

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Privately, Pakistani leaders blame Iran for inciting a Baluch insurgency that has confounded the military and political establishment in Islamabad. The reason for this is that Pakistan believes that Iran is using ethnic tensions to prevent the Musharraf regime from consolidating power, and hence, from being able to more completely align itself with Washington. In addition, Tehran shares the suspicion of Baluch tribesmen that Pakistan has made an agreement with the U.S. to develop a deep water port in Gwadar in southern Baluchistan that could serve as the site for a future U.S. naval base. Some strategic thinkers in Pakistan have argued that the only way to compel the U.S. to commit itself to Pakistan is

to establish a U.S. military base in the country. Although the political climate in Pakistan is not likely to support such a move, construction work in Gwadar has still raised the ire of both Baluch tribesmen and Iranian leaders, who look unfavorably on a permanent U.S. presence in the region—particularly so close to the naval base Iran is developing in its Baluchistan province at Chahbahar.

Iran is also concerned with the escalation of sectarian violence since 2003. Iranians believe that the Musharraf government has been far more vigilant in clamping down on Al-Qa'ida activists than on violent anti-Shi'a groups such as Lashkar Jhangvi. In fact, Sipah Sahabah Pakistan (SSP) is Musharraf's only Islamist ally—its leader, Azam Tariq, was openly allied with Musharraf until his assassination in 2003. More recently, the opposition to Musharraf has accused Pakistan intelligence of using the Shi'a militant organization Sipah Muhammad to instigate sectarian violence in Karachi. Iran's clients among the Shi'a of Pakistan are worried about sectarian violence, and the Iranian government views anti-Shi'a activism in Pakistan with great concern.

The most important issue between Iran and Pakistan, however, involves Iran's nuclear program and Pakistan's role in proliferation of nuclear technology. This is an explosive issue that is closely tied to regime survival in both countries. Iran today faces the threat of military action and regime change if it does not curb its nuclear program. Pakistan would face strong international sanctions and domestic upheaval if it is not able to contain the fallout from the A.Q. Khan issue. Each country depends on the discretion of the other to avoid an escalation of its nuclear crisis.

It is a mystery why Pakistan sold Iran nuclear technology at a time when the two countries did not have warm relations and were in fact growing estranged over the Taliban and Pakistan's close ties to Saudi Arabia. It is not clear exactly what Pakistan sold to Iran and when. However, there is no doubt that Iran's nuclear technology program was built on Pakistani technology. As such, Pakistan could fill the missing pieces in by



providing the IAEA with a more complete accounting of what it sold to Iran, and in particular, with proof that Iran's program was not meant for peaceful purposes. Iran in turn could provide proof that sale of nuclear technology was not limited to A.Q. Khan and was sanctioned by the Pakistani military. Given the stakes, the strategic relationship between the two countries is pivoted on the critical issue of managing Iran's nuclear crisis, which could deeply impact both Iranian and Pakistani regimes.

The events of September 11th radically changed the strategic perspective of Iran with regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The impregnable "Sunni wall" was replaced with opportunities for expansion of Iran's influence into Afghanistan, but also with concern for the growing U.S. presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the specter of renewed instability in

Afghanistan, and tensions born of the nuclear issue. In the past five years, Iran's perspective has been shaped by economic drivers, maximization of Iran's strategic interests, and the management of the perceived threat of an American presence in the region.

The U.S. policy in the region has been directed at restoring stability to both Afghanistan and Pakistan—to preclude growth of terrorism, eliminate narcotics trade, and reduce threats to the U.S. Iran, too, is keen on stability in the region, but not one that will exclude Iran's influence and deny its economic and strategic interests. Iran would have no stake in such stability. Moreover, sustaining a complete exclusion of Iran from the regional order would require the continued and long-term commitment of the U.S. to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its physical presence in the region.

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