

Iran's Foreign policy in Afghanistan: The Current Situation and Future Prospects

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ABSTRACT

The overthrow of Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 by the United States eliminated one of the most important threats Iran faced since the revolution of 1979. This article seeks to survey Iran's policy in post-Taliban Afghanistan in order to evaluate the feasibility of cooperation between Iran and the Western countries, particularly the United States. Our main question is that: what does Iran want in Afghanistan and what are the prospects of Iran's cooperation with the Western countries there? To answer this question, we first survey briefly Iran's policy in Afghanistan from 1979 to 2001. Then Iran's policy since the removal of Taliban from power will be discussed in the second section. In the third section, we will speculate on the possibility of future cooperation between Iran and the Western countries. Our main argument is that since Iran mainly seeks a regional solution for the current chaos in Afghanistan including its own role in state/nation-building there, the prospect for cooperation with the Western countries is not very bright.

KEY WORDS: Iran, Afghanistan, the United States Foreign Policy, Cooperation

Introduction

The history of Iran-Afghanistan foreign relationship shows the significance of Afghanistan, as one important neighbour of Iran, for various aspects of Iran's foreign policy. Iran has been the main power in Afghanistan before and after the 1740s when an independent entity by the name of Afghanistan came to existence (Ahmad Shah Durrani's coming into power in 1747). Persian was the language of the court and educated elites in Afghanistan until its occupation by the Soviet forces in 1978. Almost 20 to 25 percent of Afghan population are also Shiites as in Iran. All these factors together with having a long border with Iran are sufficient evidence to imagine how any development in Afghanistan may affect Iran. Issues such as the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan, drug trafficking via Iran, the presence of Afghan immigrants in Iran and internal conflicts and tensions in Afghanistan, especially the rise of Salafi extremist groups including Taliban, are

among issues having great implications for Iran's national security and the two countries bilateral relationships.

Iran-Afghanistan relationship has been normal since 1919 when Iran gave formal diplomatic recognition to the government in Kabul except for three periods. The first period goes back to 1962 when there appeared some tensions on the issue of Hirmand River (Helmand in Afghan side) between the two states and continued for a number of years. The second period goes back to 1978 and the domination of communist groups in Afghanistan and subsequently the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran which caused a sort of serious ideological tension between the two states and the political and economic relationship of them reached practically to zero. The third period also goes back to the years of the establishment of Taliban control over Afghanistan since 1996 and the killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazari Sharif which resulted in an unprecedented crisis between the two countries. Apart from the above three periods, the two states' relationship has usually been normal. The major point is that the presence of great powers in this country has exposed the Islamic Republic of Iran to them, the recent case of which is the presence of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan after the event of September the 11th.

This article seeks to study the prospects of the mutual relationship between Iran and the United States (plus NATO) as well as the grounds for Iranian intimacy and establishing cooperative or competitive relationship with the West in the scope of issues relevant to Afghanistan, while studying Iran-Afghanistan foreign relationship in different historical periods. The main question of this article is that: what does Iran want in Afghanistan and what are the prospects of Iran's cooperation with the Western countries there? To answer this question, we first refer to main pillars of Iran's foreign policy in Afghanistan. Secondly, we survey briefly Iran's policy in Afghanistan from 1979 to 2001. Then Iran's policy since the removal of Taliban from power will be discussed in the third section. In the final section, we will speculate on the possibility of future cooperation between Iran and the Western countries. Our main argument is that since Iran mainly seeks a regional solution for the current chaos in Afghanistan including its own role in state/nation-building there, the prospect for cooperation with the Western countries is not very bright.

Principles of Iran's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been at the core of Iranian foreign policy since the Islamic revolution in Iran. It can be stated that this country has been important for Iran for different reasons (Shafiee, 2003, Deghani, 2009: 485-491). First, Afghanistan has a geopolitical importance for Iran meaning that Iranian foreign policy has noted its geographical and geopolitical situation. In other words, it has been and still is considered that Afghanistan is the neighbour of Iran and apart from the nature of politics and government in this country, Iran has to come to terms with the

governing state. It may be said that efforts made to establish a relationship with Taliban within the last two years of its ruling, can be evaluated in this framework.

Afghanistan is also of great importance to Iran in terms of culture, civilization, language and ideology. Iran and Afghanistan have had historic and deep religious (Islam) and cultural (Persian language) links. Therefore, Iran has always been trying to benefit from the principal of geo-culture to advance its goals and interests in Afghanistan. So Iran has always been seeking to support and strengthen groups in Afghanistan which are culturally and religiously closer to Iran like the hazaras Shia and help them to secure their position in Afghan future politics and government. It could in turn result in more Iranian influence in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has geo-strategic significance for Iran, as well. The influence and presence of great powers in Afghanistan has brought about a serious threat for Iran's national security. Iran has always intended to prevent the penetration and influence of great powers considered enemy in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, by developing the scope of Iranian influence in Afghanistan, the axis of a Persian civilization zone as a strategic axis would be realized.

Finally, Afghanistan has a geo-economic importance for Iran. It is a considerable economic opportunity for Iran and the scope of Iranian presence and influence in Afghanistan may provide the ground achieving its economic interests there.

It seems that the importance of Afghanistan for Iran in various dimensions made it difficult for Iran to decide which dimension to give priority and thus unable to make a clear decision what to do in Afghanistan. As one author argues Iran's policy towards Afghanistan has always been affected by diversity of views inside the decision-making circles and thus has suffered from confusion and non-decision (Tajik, 2004: 150-151). Accordingly, the Iranian foreign policy towards Afghanistan has had numerous fluctuations, different periods of which will be shortly surveyed below.

Iranian Foreign Policy in Afghanistan from 1979 to 2001

From 1979 to the end of the Soviet Occupation

The Saur Revolution or the Communist coup in 1978 in Afghanistan and the invasion of the Soviet forces to Afghan territories in the coming year, which had provoked the U.S. concern over this occupation, turned Afghanistan into the battle ground of the two superpowers (Daheshyar, 2008). Although opposing the U.S., Iran believed that Communism is far more dangerous. Moreover, the Islamic Republic triumphed ideologically with the slogan of "No East, No West", so it could have no tendency towards none. The official position of Iran was that the Islamic Republic of Iran is after an Islamic, independent and non-aligned

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Afghanistan and does its best to realize the demands of Muslim Afghan people (Mojdeh, 2009). The Islamic Republic of Iran opposed the Communist coup in Kabul and this opposition was reiterated even more seriously when the Red Army occupied Afghanistan on Dec. 1979. Iran was the first state to condemn the military occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. The Communist government in Kabul also considered the victory of the Islamic revolution as a serious danger next to itself and took a negative position towards Iran. Within a short time, the two countries deported the others diplomats and many of the mutual agreements were annulled. It was then when the armed resistance of Afghan Mujahideens against the pro-Moscow communist regime was formed.

Iranian foreign policy in Afghanistan during the occupation of this country by the Soviet Union was affected by some factors such as deep concern over the Soviet threat, Iran's internal issues and problems resulted from the newly formed state of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the war with Iraq, and finally the extensive presence of opposing and rival states such as the U.S. and Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan. Therefore, Iran's foreign policy in this period was associated with some sort of ambiguity and prudence. It may be claimed that the revolutionary Iran was acting idealistically rather than realistically in its foreign policy regarding Afghanistan during this period, aimed at preparing the ground for the Soviet withdrawal as well as securing its status and central role in the post-occupation state through supporting different Afghan groups affiliated to Tehran such as the Shiites.

The Mujahideen Government and Internal Turmoil

After the Soviet forces pulled out of Afghanistan on February 15th, 1989, it took almost two and half a year for the Soviet puppet regime -Najibullah Regime- to be ousted from power. In April 1992, the Mujahideen forces seized Kabul and Sibghatullah Mojaddadi, as the first president of the interim government, came into power. After serving a two-month term, he transferred power to Burhanuddin Rabbani, based on a prior agreement reached by Mujahideen. Within the following four years from 1992 when president Najibullah's regime was overthrown to 1996 when the Taliban forces took over Kabul, attempts by Mujahideen to bring stability to Afghanistan was unrewarding. Although the Mujahideen government was in power, conflicts among numerous Afghan groups impeded the formation of a national unity government which could bring about stability and security in Afghanistan (Pahlavan, 1998). Power seeking of some warlords and their affiliated parties and groups such as Rabbani, Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Masoud as well as foreign meddling in Afghanistan by countries such as the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran became the origin for a civil war among various Afghani groups (Marsden, 1998: 46-49). As civil war became more sophisticated, Iran's foreign policy in Afghanistan faced a dilemma. Stressing on the Afghani people right of self-determination, Iran supported legal governments of Mojaddadi and Rabbani during the Mujahideen era. Iran was highly concerned about the internal turmoil in Afghanistan and was trying to bring about internal compromise among various Afghani groups through planning and holding several meetings and

conferences among them. Though the efforts continued by Iran to make a compromise among Mujahideen, however, the civil war in Afghanistan did not end.

The Taliban Government

Taliban entered Kabul on September 26, 1996 and the Afghan Islamic government forces withdrew to Panjshir and North of Afghanistan. A 6-person council led by Molla Mohamad Rabbani, replaced the Mujahideen government in Kabul. Russia, India, Iran and the Central Asian countries condemned Taliban actions and considered their military victory as a great risk for the peace and security in the region (Mojdeh, 2003: 20). Meanwhile the Taliban new-established government was officially recognized by three states of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Mojdeh, Ibid, 131). The emergence of Taliban and their violent views and actions led to new tension in the region, worried Iran more than anything else.

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan was considered by the Iranian government as one of the most important post-revolution threats to its national security as well as one of the major challenges to Iranian foreign policy making system. This group possessed an anti-Iran characteristic; therefore, it not only targeted the Islamic nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also was a threat to its Iranian nature. Furthermore, the support Taliban received from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States, provided grounds for Iranian serious concern. The massacre of Shiites in Mazari Sharif (approximately 2000 Shiites were massacred by Taliban at the time Mazari Sharif came under their control) and the martyrdom of 9 Iranians (8 diplomats and one Iranian TV correspondent) by Taliban forces moved Iran-Taliban relationship into a critical state and even led the two countries of Iran and Afghanistan to the threshold of war on Sept. 1998 (Rashid, 1998).

The Iranian main foreign policy goal during the reign of Taliban was to support the anti-Taliban coalition inside Afghanistan, on one hand, and participate in regional and international meetings held for the resolution of crisis in Afghanistan, on the other. Accordingly, Iranian military aid to the anti-Taliban coalition, increased after the fall of Kabul in 1996 and once again after the fall of Mazari Sharif in 1998 (Rashid, 2002: 416). Iran in the context of the group of 6 plus 2 (Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, India and Pakistan, as the six neighbouring countries together with the United States and Russia) assisted the United Nations to find solution to the crisis in Afghanistan through various meetings. Iran stressed that the Taliban control over Afghanistan is not legitimate and would put the regional peace and security at risk (Jomhoori-e Eslami, 1999). Taliban was not only a regional threat for Iran but a global threat to peace and security. The horrendous events of September 11th, 2001 attested to the rightness of Iran's view which ultimately caused the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan the same year.

Iranian Foreign Policy in Afghanistan since 2001

The United States occupation of Afghanistan eliminated the main ideological threat to Iran. The Taliban government in Kabul was considered in Tehran as the most important enemy and security threat for the country, since it 1) strengthened Salafi and Wahabi Islamic extremism in Afghanistan which was against Iran Shia religion, 2) massacred thousands of Shiites in Afghanistan, 3) increased planting narcotic drugs and its trafficking through Iran, 4) caused increasing overflow of Afghan immigration to Iran, and 5) killed Iranian diplomats. As we said before, Iran and Afghanistan during Taliban came very close to a total war. Hence, the downfall of Taliban by a third power would be the most favourable alternative for Iran, even if it was a country like the United States which was counted as Iran's bitter enemy itself.

It was evident that Iran should adopt a new approach in its foreign policy towards Afghanistan and its occupation from 2001. According to the main principles of its foreign policy, Iran could not accept the occupation of Afghanistan by the U.S. and Western countries, as it had not accepted the occupation of this country by the Soviet forces. However, after the occupation of Afghanistan by the U.S. and the downfall of Taliban, there were two different views among the Iranian policy makers. As one senior advisor to the then President Mohammad Khatami acknowledges: "some considered the post-Taliban Afghanistan as an opportunity for Iran, but some other considered the military presence of the U.S. behind the eastern borders of Iran as a serious threat (Tajik, 2004: 151). Iranian cooperative approach towards the U.S. since the beginning of the occupation of Afghanistan indicates the dominance of the first view. The downfall of Taliban was a new opportunity for Iran to hope that it could establish security in its eastern borders and therefore, it adopted a peaceful approach towards occupying powers hoping that securing the stability in Afghanistan through the formation of a powerful government could eliminate the origin of threats and insecurities for Iran in Afghanistan. It can be said that in addition to the Taliban salafi beliefs which was considered in Tehran as a major threat to Iran's shia version of Islam, the huge influence Pakistan had over Taliban and the possibility of its dominant position in the future of Afghanistan, played important role in making Iran seek to eliminate Taliban (Haji-Yousefi, 2005: 214-15).

At the outset of the incursion to Afghanistan, Iran demonstrated its readiness to help the United States in its move against Taliban. Iran agreed to 1) close its borders so Bin Laden and Al-Qaida people could not escape through Iranian territory, 2) return any American troop forced to land in the Iranian territory during the invasion of Afghanistan, 3) ask its allies in Afghanistan Northern Alliance to facilitate the U.S. war against Taliban, and 4) cooperate with Pakistan to form a new and widespread coalition government in Kabul. Therefore, at the beginning of the U.S. invasion to Afghanistan in 2001, Iran demonstrated a more cooperative approach towards Afghanistan under U.S. control. After the fall of Taliban, as well, Iran participated actively in the Bon Conference held on Dec.

2001 in order to establish a new transition government in Kabul. Iran also allocated an amount of \$650 million for the reconstruction of Afghanistan in the Donor Conference held in 2002. (Zarif, 2007: 75; Milani, 2006: 246-7; Dorraj & Zangeneh, 2009: 491-2).

However, the subsequent events led to the strengthening of the second approach among Iranian policy makers i.e., the view which considered the U.S. presence in Afghanistan as a main source of threat. By 2002, Iran along with Iraq and North Korea were put on the "axis of evil" list. This action led the Iranian policy makers into the conclusion that the U.S. had adopted a peaceful and cooperative approach towards Iran, due to the special situation after the events of Sept. 11th, 2001 and the particular need to accompany Iran in battling Al-Qaida and terrorism in Afghanistan, otherwise, the U.S. is still after the policy of regime change in Iran. Therefore, Iran's opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan was reiterated and Tehran decided once again to insist on its ad hoc view that Afghanistan does not have a military solution and supported a regional solution. As Iran's foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki said: Iran's leaders felt their cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan was not properly acknowledged. Accordingly, Iran decided to limit its cooperation with Afghanistan to help reconstruct the country (Varner, 2008). Therefore, we can say that although Tehran cooperated with the U.S. in its military campaign against Taliban and its immediate aftermath, the U.S. treatment of Iran caused Iran's reiteration of its ad hoc policy of advocating a regional solution for Afghanistan problem. As stated by an Iranian diplomat, "by emphasizing the regional solution, Iranian policy in Afghanistan aimed at helping the establishment of an independent and stable government in that country". This could, in turn, lead to returning of Afghani refugees residing inside Iran to their homeland, reducing Afghanistan rampant drug trade, and increasing bilateral economic cooperation as well as border exchanges.

That's why the Islamic Republic of Iran has participated in almost all of the conferences held on the issue of Afghanistan, has had friendly relationship with the Karzai government, and has increased its economic relationship with Afghanistan. For example, Iranian export to Afghanistan amounts to \$500 million annually, while Iran has made itself obliged to reconstruct Afghan infrastructures. Such reconstruction includes multimillion dollar plans to secure the power supply of Afghan western regions with the help of Turkmenistan, and to secure the natural gas supply of Herat (Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). However, the U.S. and the Western countries involved in Afghanistan have claimed that Iran is after instability there and has a double-sided policy towards Afghanistan, from one side of which it is an apparent supporter of stability in that country, but from the other side, it believes that the establishment of stability in this country would be considered as a U.S. success and consequently a threat for itself. Allegations that Iran is supporting anti-Karzai Mujahideen and helping arm Taliban and Al-

Qaida are made in this context.(Iran: Afghanistan is Barometer of U.S. Relationship, 2009).

It may seem logical to say that since Iran is faced with two enemies in Afghanistan i.e., the U.S. on the one hand and the Taliban on the other, she must adopt a policy in the war between its two enemies that guarantee that neither the U.S. nor the Taliban would win the war (Dehghani, 2009: 486), however, it is almost impossible to prove with hard evidence that Iran has helped its ideological enemy. The main reason for proving such claim is that since Taliban is acting in opposition to the U.S. which may fulfill Iran's interests and inflict damage to the American forces, Iran is helping arm the Taliban in Pakistan-Afghanistan borders.

Obviously, due to Iran's legitimate security concerns, it seems rational for her to oppose the long-term presence of the U.S. troops in Afghanistan in any form (in the present form which is the continuation of the occupation or in the form of establishing military bases). We may say that, as Holiday claims, Iran was waiting eagerly for a third party such as the U.S. to enter Afghanistan and overthrow the Taliban government (Holiday, 2001), but long-term presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan is definitely considered by Iranian authorities a serious security threat to Tehran. Therefore, it seems that for the foreseeable future Iran will insist on its belief that the occupying forces have to leave Afghanistan and that a regional solution is the most feasible one. Failure of the U.S. and the Western countries in Afghanistan to bring about security in that country after ten years of occupation supports the Iranian standpoint.

Iran & the U.S. (the West) in Afghanistan: Cooperation, Confrontation, or Competition?

In this section we seek to speculate about the future of Iran-U.S. relationship in Afghanistan. Our main question is what is the prospect of Iran-U.S. relation in Afghanistan? Would it be cooperative, confrontational or competitive? This article argues that because of different goals and interests of the U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan, on one hand, and their differences regarding other regional and international issues on the other, the most probable scenario would be the continuation of Iran-U.S. competition and maybe confrontation not cooperation in Afghanistan.

After 10 years of the presence of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, the security situation there has not only not improved but deteriorated. Taliban forces set up military operations against the foreign troops almost every day and have the capability to inflict severe damages on them. They use road-side bombs to set on blast foreign convoys and kill many American as well as other foreign country military forces. Recently the American and NATO authorities have realised that they have to adopt a new policy in order to confront the Taliban attacks and bring about security in Afghanistan.

In this new policy, apparently, Iran is considered to have a very vital role to play. Some U.S. officials such as David Petraeus, the ex-commander of American forces in Afghanistan, believe that the U.S. and Iran can cooperate to bring stability and peace to Afghanistan. The NATO member states are also seeking Iran's cooperation in Afghanistan and seem to be ready to give Iran a more significant role in strategic decision making there. It seems that Iran is able to cooperate with the United States and the NATO, but as we have already mentioned, since it has no positive experience from its cooperation with the U.S. during the invasion to Afghanistan in order to overthrow Taliban and immediately after that, it is not very much probable that Iran would consider such offers. As Boroojerdi the ex-deputy foreign minister of Iran and current parliamentarian says: "one of the Principles in Iran's policy to promote regional security is that Afghanistan crisis can only be solved through regional mechanisms by regional neighbouring countries. Iran has always opposed the foreign countries presence in the region and believes that such presence will neither bring about regional security nor benefit the regional states rather creates lots of insecurities. Meanwhile Iran also doesn't recognize Taliban and will not accept negotiation with a group that is definitely a terrorist group which demonstrate an unrealistic and false image of Islam (Boroojerdi, 2009).

Besides chaos and instability in Afghanistan which no doubt undermine Iran's security and national interest, the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is considered in Tehran as an existential threat. Tehran believes that the U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future though in different format. The U.S. officials have repeatedly mentioned that they are ready to stay as long as it is required or they have asked Afghanistan authorities for permission to set up military bases throughout the country. Bagram military base in the North of Kabul and Shindand base in the West of Afghanistan, in the province of Herat, are of the most important military bases the U.S. is concerned about in Afghanistan. There is also a probability of establishing a U.S. military base in Qandahar and Mazari Sharif (Khani, 2005: 95). Americans have recently tried hard to establish a military base in Ghurian and near the Iranian border, but have not yet gained the consent of Afghan government (Madani, 2009).

Therefore, Iran wants to make sure that Afghanistan would not be a base for American operations against Iran. Of course, it seems that due to its historical experience in Afghanistan, Iran is confident that such thing would never happen. The history of Afghanistan shows that the Pashto nationalism, Afghanistan geography and its ethnic configuration, led to the defeat of the Great Britain in the 19th century. Based on this analysis, Tehran is positive that the U.S. (and the NATO) forces would not succeed in Afghanistan, since not only the three historical elements which led to the defeat of the British forces as the most powerful western country in that time, still exist in Afghanistan, but the U.S. and NATO forces are facing a fourth factor i.e., the political Islam. (Daheshyar, 2009). A decade of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and its defeat and withdrawal

proves that this historic pattern has not changed and can not be changed through military force. At the present time it seems that the U.S. is committing a strategic mistake by not only keeping its forces in Afghanistan but also increasing their number with the aim of removing Taliban and defeating global terrorism (Daheshyar, 2008). After approximately a decade of war in Afghanistan, the Taliban forces are not dismantled, rather they are making their adversary accept their role in the future of Afghanistan. Their presence in the south and south eastern Afghanistan and their incursions against the NATO forces have led the Western countries including the U.S. to think of a new strategy of dealing with Taliban (Tellis, 2009).

According to Tehran, the U.S. once again is in sticky situation in Afghanistan and this is the only reason the American authorities are thinking again of contacting Iran and asking her assistance (Ghafoori, 2009). Since Iran's previous contributions to the peace and security in Afghanistan have not been acknowledged by the U.S. and NATO, the Iranian positive reaction seems far-off. However, it may open a new ground for the Iran-U.S. contacts in Afghanistan. It is in Iran's interest that the U.S. and NATO forces come to the realization that there is no solution to Afghanistan chaos without the active participation of the neighbouring countries. This is what Iran insists on as a regional solution to this issue. As one author close to decision-making circles in the Islamic Republic argues, Iran would not cooperate with the U.S. and NATO forces if they do not accept Iran's policy of regional solution (Mottaghi, 2010). Iran now believes that its direct and indirect cooperation with the U.S. in Afghanistan crisis especially during the American invasion to remove Taliban and immediately after that in Bon Conference did not decrease the tension in their relationship since the U.S. was looking for a separate agenda. Accordingly the natural alliance of Iran-U.S. in Afghanistan did not alter American policy of regime change in Tehran (Dehghani, 2009: 490). Thus, the future of Iran-U.S. relation in Afghanistan is at best competitive and at worst confrontational.

The Islamic Republic of Iran sees the military presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan and other neighbouring countries (Iraq, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia) as its encirclement in order to contain the Islamic revolution ideals, on one hand, and change the regime in Tehran on the other. Therefore, it can be said that one of the strategic goals of the U.S. in attacking Afghanistan and continuing its occupation was to prevent Iran's influence in Afghanistan. Another main goal might be to cut the connections of Iran and Central Asia which regarded by Iran as its zone of cultural and civilization influence. Looking at the occupation of Afghanistan from this angle, it could be imagined why Tehran is harshly opposing the American and NATO presence there. Iran's security and interest are highly threatened. Accordingly, Tehran considers the fact that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan can be effective in the provocation and creation of insecurity in the East of Iran (Khani, 2005: 88). Further, it will facilitate the presence of countries such as Saudi Arabia, a U.S. regional ally, who according to Tehran seeks to

substitute the Iranian influence in Afghanistan and Mecca meeting in October 2008 in which Afghan authorities were said to have negotiated with Taliban for political settlement was considered as an effort to eliminate Iran from the future equations of Afghanistan (Molazehi, 2010).

As former deputy foreign minister of Iran acknowledges, "If the 'client government' of Afghanistan changes into an 'independent government', then we may observe manifestations of strategic stability. If there is stability in Afghanistan, then the role of superpowers specifically the U.S. would decrease remarkably. Hence, Iran's geo-strategic ideals require the considerable decline in the position of superpowers in the future destiny of Afghanistan. Requirements of Iran's foreign policy in Afghanistan are based on regional constructivism. Constructivism can be considered as a ground for maximising the regional cooperative relationship. It can be fulfilled through a cooperation-based competition. If ground is ready for cooperation in economic plans in Afghanistan, signals of improvement in conditions in an international level and an environment to impact political procedures in Afghanistan may be made. The second pattern in securing Iran's interests in Afghanistan may be recognized as the opposition with the influence of the foreign countries in this region. Iran's strategic planning must be organized in opposing and confronting the behavioural pattern of the U.S. The less desirable is Afghanistan for the U.S., the better the situation for Iran" (Mohammadi, 2007: 227).

According to Iran the settlement of crisis in Afghanistan through regional means may lead to the U.S. and Western countries' decreasing influence as well as their pull out from there. In Iranian policy making circles, it is believed that the U.S. is attempting to enlarge the gap between Iran and Afghanistan and even promote conflicts between them while regional peace and security requires that these bilateral differences to be minimized and Tehran becomes able to have very cordial and constructive relation with Kabul especially through increasing economic and trade relations. As Mohammadi says, "the cultural similarities of Iran and Afghanistan as well as Iran's economic capabilities which can be used to support Afghan future reconstruction plans, creates a more appropriate environment for the interaction in mutual relationships (Mohammadi, 2007: 228).

Accordingly, Iran's security and national interest can be guaranteed through a friendly, stable, secure, neutral, non-aligned and moderate Afghanistan. As one Iranian career diplomat acknowledges, the Iranian policy makers' main perception is that such an Afghanistan can be achieved only through a government in Kabul which looks for a regional framework rather than extra-regional strategic cooperation with great powers to solve its problems (Mousavi, 2009). Many Afghan people, particularly those residing in the North or East of this country, seems to have also reached to the same conclusion that the presence of foreign forces has brought neither security nor welfare and happiness to them. Accordingly, the best way to establish durable stability and security in

Afghanistan is to develop the economic reconstruction in which the neighbouring countries, especially Iran, play an important role.

Conclusion

Despite of the common interests of the U.S. and Iran in overthrowing Taliban in 2001, they are in loggerhead again there. The U.S. lack of acknowledging Iran's cooperative role in Afghanistan made Tehran to choose a "no winner policy" whose aim is that neither the U.S. and NATO nor the Taliban forces win the battle in Afghanistan. Iran's declared policy in Afghanistan is based on the regional solution for the Afghan chaos and non-tolerance of great powers' presence there. Therefore, this article concludes that Afghanistan can not be used as a bridge to establish a cooperative relationship between Iran and the U.S. The presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan is considered a major threat for Iran and thus the U.S. exit from Afghanistan not only eliminate this threat but also bring about a sort of freeing Iran's capacities to run through its eastern borders (Tahaei, 2010).

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