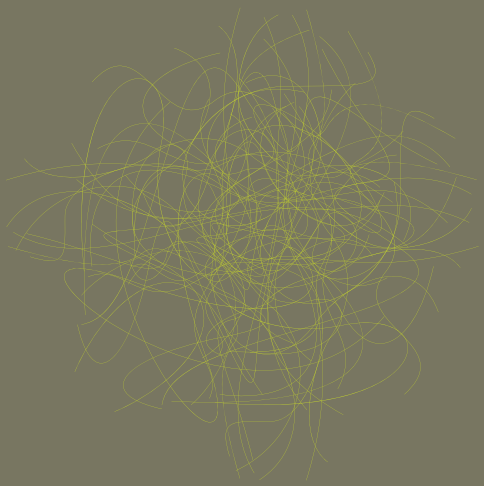
Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Regional Perspective

Perspectives from the Region in 2013 & 2014:

6. IRAN

October 2014



CIDOB Policy Research Project

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Under CIDOB's "Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Regional Perspectives (STAP RP)" policy research project on the regional powers and their interests, this series is a product of field research visits to a number of the key regional powers identified in the 2012 Mapping Document http://www.cidobafpakproject.com/ *by the STAP RP project team.*

Understanding the perspectives of the five main regional powers (India, Iran, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia) with an interest in outcomes in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a critical element in relation to this volatile region, which is currently in a state of flux as 2014 approaches. Identification of opportunities for dialogue, peace building, improved bilateral relationships and the development of regional organisations as mechanisms for dialogue, as well as examining how the regional powers see Afghanistan and Pakistan from a broader geopolitical and foreign policy perspective are key elements in enhancing this understanding.

This report is a product of meetings in Tehran in October 2014. It is jointly authored by Emma Hooper and Roberto Toscano.

While many experts contributed to the findings presented, the final responsibility for the content is that of CIDOB alone.

IRAN AND THE REGION: THE VIEW FROM TEHRAN

Recently-expressed views from experts in Tehran in relation to Iran and the region, and specifically on Afghanistan and Pakistan, converge in presenting Iran as both seeking regional stability and as having an important role in promoting it. The strategic role of Iran in solving regional issues – including in Afghanistan - was underlined, as was the need for meaningful regional cooperation to bring about stability and peace.

In Afghanistan, the new unity government led by Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah is seen as a demonstration of the arrival of a new era. Iran reportedly supported the compromise leading to a national unity government, including because the prevailing vacuum following the contested election results was seen as having a security impact on Iran itself. Continued turmoil and violence in Afghanistan directly affects Iran, both in terms of the inflow of refugees, drug smuggling, and the activities of cross-border Sunni militant incursions from Pakistani Balochistan into Iran (by *Jaish ul Adl*, or Army of Justice: Iran is reportedly even considering entering Pakistani territory in hot-pursuit missions.) Prior to the resolution of the impasse around the Afghan presidential elections, Iran´s view was that the country was heading to a new round of instability, and hopes were expressed that the unity government, which Iran wants to support in any way possible, "*will gain real power*". Despite pessimism in the region about the likely longevity of the unity government, Iran "*sees it in place for at least five years*". Iran is likely to expand its cooperation with Afghanistan, particularly in the areas of culture, the economy, security and addressing the drug problem. The latter is particularly critical due to the blowback repercussions on Iran itself, which, as was pointed out, has had a long history of combatting the transit of drugs to Europe. Iran will therefore continue its fight against prevention of passage to traffickers, even though asked-for international support, especially from Europe, was reportedly not forthcoming. Reasons for this include the links between drug money and extremist terror groups.

Regarding the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops from Afghanistan, on the one hand, the presence of foreign forces there is seen as strongly affecting the region, and worsens Iran-US relations, feeding the continuing cycle of violence in both Afghanistan itself and further afield. Foreign forces become extremist targets, with a spillover effect on neighbouring countries including Central Asia (which was noted as a concern for Russia, as well). However, on the other hand, "*the withdrawal of US troops should be a responsible withdrawal*", combined with confidence-building measures towards all countries in the region, as one expert put it. Furthermore, pressure should be put on Pakistan to stop its "*negative actions*" in Afghanistan, seen as only being possible due to "*support from abroad*". When asked about the possible "compensation" for the withdrawal of US troops in Afghanistan with new US bases in e.g. Azerbaijan or Central Asia, respondents noted their pessimism regarding the US and its policies, and the desire to retain bases in Afghanistan was not seen as limited to its aims in Afghanistan. It was further noted that Russia, China and the Central Asian states all shared this concern. China has the additional motivation of its domestic problems in Xinjiang. In the light of the US´s "pivot to Asia", China is seen as wanting to counter, and if possible prevent, a strategy of containment by the US. Overall, China´s economic motivations in relation to

both Afghanistan and Pakistan are seen as considerable: should there be a power vacuum in either country, in Tehran´s view, China would move to protect its interests there. As regards Europe´s involvement in the region, Iran´s expectations are that Europe should follow a policy stance separate from that of the US, and Tehran "*would not want to see Europe as following in the footsteps of the US´s problems*". It was noted that there is a lot of potential to work with Europe in both Afghanistan and across the region. Solution of the nuclear problem could lead to the opening of many windows for cooperation on a range of issues.

In terms of the broader region, Islamic State (IS) or Da´esh as it is commonly referred to in Iran (as in the Arab world), is regarded as entrenched in Iraq and Syria, and is *"a possibility in other countries of the Middle East*" in the future. Developments in Afghanistan, and the role of Pakistan in this regard, are seen by Iran as key. The view was expressed that "*Pakistan holds the security situation in Afghanistan in its own hands*" and that the way this unfolds will be influenced by Pakistan´s own internal security situation. In addition, Pakistan is seen as being able to continue its policies in the region with the blessing of the US.

In Tehran´s view, Islamabad wants to exert leverage and pressure on Afghanistan through its influence over extremist groups, though it was noted that there is lack of clarity as to which elements in Pakistan (army, intelligence services, government) are involved in this regard. However, "*until Pakistan becomes serious about addressing terrorism, both in-country and in Afghanistan, instability will continue*". Iran reportedly has exerted pressure in the past over the role of Pakistan´s security services in relation to Afghanistan, and there appears to be little optimism of a change of stance in this regard, according to analysts. In a context of a new upsurge of tension in Indo-Pakistan relations over Kashmir, the view was expressed that Iran has good relations with India and good cooperation in Afghanistan; and that Iran would welcome any effort by regional countries to help bring peace and tranquillity in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding, it was considered that India "*should avoid manipulating Pakistan*" in the Afghan context. For Iran, "*a stable Afghanistan means a stable Iran*", and Iran is seen as having a strong capacity to be of assistance there, sharing experience in the fields of education, training, culture, economy and transit routes, construction, mineral exploitation, and road and rail infrastructure provision. Given the linguistic overlap between Dari and Farsi, Iran has what it sees as a privileged comparative advantage, for example in training female police. In contrast to sectarian concerns in Pakistan, sectarianism in Afghanistan is not seen as an issue by Tehran:[1] the Tajik-Pashtun issue there was regarded as "*an imported spoiler element introduced by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan*". The specific differences between religiously-motivated violence in Pakistan, which has also an ethnic overlay, and sectarianism in Iraq and Syria, was pointed out.

Within Pakistan, the much-vaunted Operation Zarb e Azb has had limited success and is seen by Tehran as "*selective*", with terrorists being divided into on- and off-limits for pursuit by government troops. One expert defined it as a "*cosmetic operation*", also used as a tool for internal power games. None the less, recent statements by the Pakistani Taliban notwithstanding, they have not – yet - merged with ISIS, nor have they accepted ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as their

1. In line with expert analysis on the subject in STAP RP papers by Abu Bakar Siddique, Afghanistan´s Ethnic Divides, January 2012; and Michael Semple, Power to the Periphery, July 2012 and Afghanistan: Future Scenarios, November 2013

Caliph. These statements are seen as a desire to show that the Pakistani Taliban have the capacity to act if the situation should worsen for them. However the implications of the Pakistani Taliban´s statement are potentially far-reaching and according to Tehran, have the potential to change the *jihadist* landscape, if not contained. Whilst commenting that Da´esh is not a significant threat emanating from Pakistan (as yet, at least), where terror groups´ allegiances to Mullah Omar still trump those to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, analysts none the less noted what they saw as power plays within Pakistan in this regard, which "*cause problems*" in Afghanistan as well as domestically, due to what are regarded as internal differences between politicians and the military.

The role of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia in financing extremist groups as well as in support of radical, Wahabi religious training in *madrassahs* was noted in this regard, as well as in relation to support of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the view of one expert, "*the aim (of Saudi Arabia) is to occupy Iran´s back yard*", noting that this is a problem not only for Iran but for the whole region. Whilst there has been a considerable upsurge in the incidence of sectarian Sunni-Shi´a violence in Pakistan over the past 18 months, this is seen not as a sectarian, but as a political issue, and a consequence of what was termed "*manipulation*" by Saudi Arabia. Economically, the IPI pipeline is in stasis, with Iran "*waiting for Pakistan to finish its side of the works, with little sign of action*" despite commitments signed and the real likelihood of fines for non-completion of agreements. Indo-Pak relations remain a concern for Tehran, which sees the arrival of the new Modi government as having been seized on as a pretext for increased militarism on the part of Pakistan.

Overall, Iran would like to see stable relations with Pakistan, not least because of the instability in Afghanistan. Specifically, there is a desire for better border control in Balochistan, and Iran is trying to improve relations in this regard. If improvement is not possible, the aim would be for containment of problems. Specifically, Pakistan "*should not follow the role of the Arab countries in importing problems from outside* (with reference to Sunni-Shi´a violence in Pakistan, seen as a "*manufactured output from Saudi Arabia*").

As regards Central Asia, long-regarded by Iran as a territory of Iranian civilisation, Iran has brokered the rapprochement between the government and Islamist opposition in Tajikistan, and in its own view, "*has played an important role there*", including in avoiding an upsurge in violence – which is in keeping with Iran´s view of itself as a key regional power with an important role to play.[2] Iran would like to see a calm, stable Central Asia – as would Russia – since it is of cultural, economic and political importance to Tehran. In Uzbekistan, as in Pakistan and in Central Asia, Iran underlines the importance of the role of Turkey, which should not be ignored, including because of its geographical position as a transit route from Central Asia to the rest of the world, including Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan for *jihadi´s* including Tatars, Chechens, Kosovars**.** It was further pointed out that this has now become a Turkish problem as well. Indeed, regarding the potential reintegration of jihadi terrorists into Europe, Iranian experts noted that the Turks have been "informed" that what they are doing in Syria and Iraq - in particular facilitating the transit of *jihadi* fighters - is similar to the (proxy war) actions of Pakistan in Afghanistan, and to beware of the potential consequences.

2. See Toscano, R., Iran´s Role in Afghanistan, STAP RP paper January 2012, which comments on the importance of recognition of Iran as a key regional power.

CONCLUSIONS

Discussions in Tehran confirmed that the Iranians' main priority in their relations with their eastern neighbours is, in the first place, the prevention of security threats. For this reason, a US military presence in Afghanistan has been opposed, but the US withdrawal is now seen with some concern because of its possible destabilizing consequences (hence the hope that it will be "responsible", i.e., gradual).

Besides security, which also focused on issues such as trans-border drug trafficking and terrorism, in particular with separatist aims – another priority is the recognition of Iran as a main regional player as well as a substantial economic partner. It can be considered significant as far as Afghanistan is concerned, that Tehran's criteria in determining Iranian support to the country's different components, are cultural and linguistic (with Dari-speakers as the favorite interlocutors), rather than ethnic (Pashtun/non-Pashtun) or sectarian (Shia/Sunni).

As for Pakistan, in spite of a somewhat harsh analysis of Pakistani (and behind it, Saudi) roles in the support of the Taliban, what appears to prevail in Tehran is the belief that good relations with Islamabad must be pursued, in particular because of the fact that the stability or instability of Afghanistan will largely depend on Pakistan´s behaviour. At the same time, Iran seems concerned about the internal stability of Pakistan, convinced as it is that, without a stable Pakistan, there cannot be stability in the region, and in consequence, there cannot be security for Iran.

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