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Section III. Russia–Iran Cooperation on Afghanistan and Central Asia

Topic 7. Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Afghanistan: Possibilities and Constraints

Afghanistan has historically been a zone of exclusive interests for both Russia, whose history is filled with fruitful cooperation and good neighbourly relations with the Afghan people,109 and for Iran, which shares a state border with its eastern neighbour, as well as a number of many civilizational features. The profound political and socioeconomic crisis and the permanent military–political conflict that has riven Afghan society for decades, pose a regional geopolitical problem. While dealing with internal disputes and conflicts is the main priority and prerogative of the socio–political forces and people of Afghanistan, reacting to their external consequences that spread beyond its territory has placed a heavy burden on the neighbouring states and has formed the basis of the regional security system in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

It is true that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, which began in 2001, and the withdrawal of a significant portion of the U.S.–led NATO contingent from Afghanistan in 2014 brought about serious changes to the region.110 But the situation remains in many ways uncertain and unstable. The combination of old and new challenges and threats emanating from the military–political crisis in Afghanistan largely determine the design and characteristics of international relations in Central and Southern Asia. The perception of the “Afghan problem” and the principles and mechanisms for the leading regional actors – notably the Russian Federation and Iran – to resolve it are crucial in many ways. This article attempts to answer the pressing questions that arise in this context: how do Russia and Iran see the threats coming from Afghanistan? How can Moscow and Teheran influence the situation? Is cooperation with third countries on the issue possible?

For many years, Russia and Iran have pledged and delivered support to the central government of Afghanistan under Hamid Karzai (2002–2014) and Sharif Ghani (since 2014). Both states want the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty under a legitimate parliament and government which fully control, and are responsible for, the country’s territory.

Until recently, however, these two countries have placed an emphasis on different aspects of Afghanistan’s sovereignty. Thus, while Teheran has flatly rejected any foreign presence in Afghanistan, both throughout the presence of ISAF and until

today, Moscow took a more reticent stand. Refraining from value judgements on any issue other than the fight against terror and drug trafficking, the Russian political establishment used the U.S. military presence pragmatically to pursue its own goals in Afghanistan (the fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda) and in the region as a whole (military-political integration within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organization).

At the same time, Russian officials at various levels have repeatedly expressed a readiness to develop partnership relations with any agents to address the common problems and threats in Afghanistan and Central Asia, such as the production and transport of narcotics, the activities of international terrorist groups, and ensuring food and environmental security. Although these initiatives often did not elicit any response from the United States and NATO, Russia has remained committed to its declared principles and has made some progress in these areas in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a fact that has not been lost on Iran. Exchange of experience in fighting extremism and terrorism, as well as cooperation in this sphere between government structures in Iran and Russia – bilaterally or within the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure – takes on added significance due to the increased threat of radical Islam in Afghanistan after DAESH cells began springing up on its territory.

The worsening of the relations between Russia and the West in 2014–15 brought the Russian position closer to that of Iran. Thus, Moscow no longer derived any benefit from the constant military presence of U.S. and NATO forces close to its borders and the zone of its vital interests (i.e. Central Asia). Meanwhile, the remaining challenges of Islamic terrorism, drug trafficking and environmental, food and migration security are equally important for Russia and Iran, which motivates expanded and deepening bilateral cooperation and interaction in a whole range of areas.

Both Moscow and Teheran consider a victory of the Taliban in its ongoing civil war against the current regime in Afghanistan to be unacceptable. The readiness of both states to recognize the Taliban as a party to the political process is a forced concession prompted by the realization that the use of exclusively military means to resolve the existing crisis is futile, and does not mean that they agree to deal with a revived Islamic Emirate of the Taliban as a legitimate government of Afghanistan. Although the military threat posed by the Taliban to the territories of Russia and Iran is more imagined than real, the restoration of the regime that was crushed in 2001 could contribute to the further spread of the infrastructure of international Islamist terrorist groups in Afghanistan. This is a scenario that can destabilize the situation in Central Asia, as well as on Russia’s southern brooders and in Iran’s border areas. The threat is posed not only by terrorism, but also by

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113 These conclusions were made as a result of discussions held under the auspices of the Russian International Affairs Council as part of the roundtable entitled “Development of the Situation in Afghanistan 2016” (Moscow, April 18, 2016).
uncontrolled migration, a new wave of “drugs export,” a worsening of the crime situation in the neighbouring states (especially the border areas) in the short term and the total exclusion of Afghanistan from the regional political and economic system for many years to come.

Even so, the security problem, which appears to be of paramount importance, does not cover the entire sphere of the two countries’ interests in Afghanistan. No less important is the economic sphere, in which both countries look at Afghanistan from at least two angles.

First, Russia and Iran see Afghanistan as a market for exports. Naturally, the scale of Iran–Afghanistan cooperation in this field is far greater than that between Russia and Afghanistan, though the structure of export differs. Iran’s primary exports to Afghanistan are fuel and energy, including petroleum processing products. Russia can currently offer mostly military products. In the long term, exports can be expanded to include agricultural produce and electricity (jointly with Central Asian partners). Thus, Iranian and Russian goods do not compete in the Afghan market; both countries are interested in seeing the market grow and develop.

Secondly, both Russia and Iran see Afghanistan as a transit country in the system of regional and inter–regional trade. Afghanistan’s geographical position makes it an indispensable part of trade exchanges between the East and the West on the one hand, and the North and the South on the other. Direct routes linking Iran, China, Central Asia (whose transport infrastructure is oriented towards Russia) and South Asia pass through Afghanistan. The Iranian leadership under Rahbar Ali Khamenei sees its country’s future in the light of its grand “Looking East” development strategy in which Afghanistan is assigned a special place. In a way, the concept is related to the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt project which, among other things, shapes the Chinese vision of future cooperation with Iran in the field of energy and goods trade. These relations have continued to develop throughout the period of sanctions against Iran and are set to grow stronger. Thus, pipelines can be laid across Afghan territory to carry Iranian oil and gas to China and to Central and South Asian countries. The most important challenge facing Russia is to establish transit relations with India (as a key BRICS partner), and in the near future with the SCO across the territory of Central Asia and Afghanistan, in order to diversify and increase bilateral trade by bringing in members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

There are a number of objective obstacles to the full use of the potential of bilateral cooperation between Iran and Russia in Afghanistan. For example, the two countries do not have any experience of cooperating in those economic areas where such cooperation is possible. Besides, because of the complicated military–political situation in the country, most of its territory is characterized by a high risk of insurgency, local crime and terrorist cells, thus making it impossible for Russian companies to do business. By contrast, Iranian businesses invest close to the Iran–Afghanistan border (mainly in the Herat, Farah and Nimroz provinces), where the local pro–Iranian Shiite and Tajik population ensures a sufficient level of security. For Iran, investing in the rehabilitation of these parts of Afghanistan constitutes a long–term investment in the development of production capacity on
its own territory and in strengthening security on its eastern borders. By building up cooperation with the border areas of Afghanistan, Iran does not just create jobs on its own periphery, but secures a market for its goods and services. Russia does not at present have such exclusive zones and opportunities in Afghanistan, which increases the risks, involved in independent economic activity many times over, considering lack of stability and the weakness of the state and the central government as the preferred Russian partner in the country.

The United States, China, India and Pakistan – the most involved external parties to the Afghan conflict – have serious instruments for influencing the situation in Afghanistan. However, while cooperation with the United States over Afghanistan is limited for Iran and Russia in the medium term because of the overall negative background created by developments in Ukraine and Syria, the mood both in Moscow and Teheran concerning the prospects of interaction with other powers is fairly upbeat.116

Pakistan wields influence over those segments of the Afghan political elite – both government and anti-government – with which Iran and Russia have for various reasons failed to find a common language, something that must be done if they are to achieve their declared goals. Islamabad remains the key economic partner of Kabul while at the same time continuing to show an interest in integration and mutually beneficial interaction with the countries in the region within the SCO structure. The persisting tensions between India and Pakistan remain a powerful destabilizing factor in and outside South Asia. While Iran has experience of interacting with Pakistan in economics, regional politics and security (including energy security), the links between Islamabad and Moscow are confined to intelligence and military structures and a limited trade and economic agenda.

India is interested in peace in Afghanistan and the elimination of the “Islamist threat” emanating from the zone of instability in Pashtunistan on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. For India, the economic agenda is secondary, which makes it similar to Russia in many ways as it is interested in forging effective alliances of states to resolve the “Afghan problem” by available means and methods. Russia–India relations have a solid foundation, which holds out a promise of further development, whereas cooperation between India and Iran runs into numerous obstacles. Therefore, successful cooperation between Russia and Iran with regard to Afghanistan may either be used to mend fences between Teheran and Delhi, with Moscow as the mediator, or it may breed mistrust on the part of India if it feels that the rapprochement between Russia and Iran does not meet its interests.

Russia, Iran and Pakistan are no match for China, India and the United States in terms of economic might. But they have experience of, and instruments for, dealing with security issues, which form the core of the Afghan problem. Russia and


Iran can complement each other, compensating for the weaknesses of the other partner in the pursuit of common goals.

Russia as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which has experience and authority in organizing the negotiating process in Syria and which is an important participant and initiator of regional integration initiatives (CSTO, SCO) and their military component, together with Iran, which has historical, ethno-linguistic and religious ties with Afghanistan and, at this time, greater political and economic presence on its territory, have the capacity to cooperate to mutual advantage in overcoming the key threats generated by the Afghan crisis.

Security is undoubtedly the quintessence of the “Afghan” interests of Russia and Iran as partners in bilateral cooperation and members of regional interstate associations and organizations. The problem of security lies at the root of any future plan for the development of Afghanistan, as well as of foreign participation or assistance in such development in pursuit of their own national interests in the region. The continuing armed conflict between the Kabul government and the Taliban is a long way from being resolved in spite of the split within the Taliban camp, which helps maintain a high level of insecurity inside the country and spreads instability beyond its borders. Thus, the need for developing and intensifying bilateral cooperation in this area is objectively relevant to Russia and Iran because they depend on, and are interested in, a prosperous, united and sovereign Afghanistan.

Fresh efforts to coordinate and institutionalize joint actions in the region may give an impetus to intensified bilateral contacts with regard to Afghanistan. It is necessary both on a bilateral basis and within the SCO to intensify contacts between Russian and Iranian representatives in a whole range of areas in order to determine the prospects for cooperation, not only at the strategic, but also at the tactical level. In doing so, it is necessary to distinguish two areas of interaction: cooperation in countering the threats emanating from Afghanistan (drug trafficking, terrorism, uncontrolled illegal migration, etc.) and promoting reconciliation inside Afghanistan. In the medium term, Russia’s economic leverage is fairly limited, and its economic interests in Afghanistan are uncertain. This offers extra opportunities and removes certain limitations for other regional actors in building constructive relations with Iran in the medium term. Iran’s economic presence in Afghanistan meets Russia’s interests and may help the latter achieve its own strategic goals. The issue of assisting the restoration of Afghanistan is relevant, while Iran’s experience in that field is interesting and useful for Russia – though it is still secondary because it hinges on the solution of political and military problems. Not being rivals, but sharing common goals, Russia and Iran have a chance to realize the mutual benefit of bilateral cooperation in Afghanistan by improving the system of reacting to security threats, agreeing and coordinating actions to shore up and restore Afghanistan and develop the regional security and cooperation architecture.
Introduction

In recent decades, political entities, along with accepting the globalization of existence methods in the international arena, have attempted to redefine their interests and identities within regional frameworks. These new cooperative trends in regions are frequently interpreted within the context of New Regionalism Theories. The concept of new regionalism has provided an appropriate ground for forming various layers of regional cooperation in an independent framework, separated from global trends and based on two elements, ‘thematic openness’ and ‘geographical flexibility’.

This article sets about addressing the question by looking at the Iranian–Russian relationship and the role of new regionalism in drawing both states closer to cooperate in Afghanistan. The analysis focuses on a question that has been central to the debate: How Iran and Russia could cooperate closely in establishing peace and security in Eurasia and Afghanistan in particular. This article will argue that based on new regionalism theories, Iran and Russia, despite a diversity of interests, can come to a common definition of identities and norms for establishing stability and security in Afghanistan. The result would be a closer cooperation on resolving regional conflicts and promoting shared interests in the region.

New Regionalism Theory

Regionalism is not a new concept in the literature of international relations. It has a life of at least five decades in contemporary history. However, different perceptions and interpretations have been presented for the concept in different eras, each of which reflects some truth, about the governing structure of the international system in any particular era. Without any doubt, macro–level attention to the relationships between political units in the international stage is one of the most important barriers in developing cooperation and convergence among these units at a regional level within the framework of classical regionalism. Moreover, since countries cannot have different places at any particular time, like billiard balls, due to the fact that they are dependent on the geographical areas in which they exist. Therefore, they do not have the option to join various regional arrangements. Thus, this could be seen as a barrier to regionalism which in turn, it should be noted, has led to the majority of the animosities and battles in the history among neighboring countries. Hence, countries have often tried to help great powers which are far off in order to move away from the harm of their own powerful neighbors.

From another perspective or approach, hostility or animosity among neighbors in every region can itself prepare the grounds for cooperation. History bears witness to the fact that when economic interests and national peace and prosperity become important, countries seek to identify and recognize the benefits of each other. Therefore, competition in the framework of coexistence characterizes the relationship rather than the search for enmity, war and destruction. They come to believe that the damages of war are too heavy and expensive and thus they try to avoid it as much as possible from the outset. This pragmatic approach to cooperation for achieving collective security and protection of the interests of regional actors is the first step toward convergence and regionalism as a bridge between
two study levels of micro (including political units) and macro (including international structures) regionalism. In fact, regionalism has helped to increase and boost regional security. Moreover, this perception from regionalism has offered a form of independence to countries in opposition to the concept of globalization and their absorption into it.

Since the 1990s and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new approach came into existence and new arrangements in the framework of the “new regionalism” concept have been made in this field of study.

The new approach to regionalism, more than anything else, emphasizes the characteristics of ‘openness of definition for the concept of region’ and its different ‘layers’. Therefore, not only countries are less involved and bound in ideological arrangements for their joining or separation, but also geography is regarded as a relative term. It can then be seen that there are countries which have joined regional organizations outside their regions. Definition of the concept of region has become more flexible and various forms of regionalism, regional organizations and institutions can be created on the basis of the interests of the countries brought together in one geographical region. Therefore, even the two processes of globalization and unipolarism have not been able to prevent regionalism and even sometimes, on the contrary, have helped to forge it. In fact, in the new order, the entire world has been globally regional rather than moving toward unipolar and/or multipolar in the macro-level of the international system. Moreover, although powerful political units have their own roles and particular functions, regional actors have also found a stage to show themselves.

This new kind of regionalism, as informed, has constructed identities and norms within the framework of institution-building. In this new discourse, sometimes multiple identities have been defined in a geographical area and have overlapped with each other. Subsequently, several layers of regionalism could be formed simultaneously with different functions while each country defines its regional relations according to its needs and interests in one or more layers. Consequently, a ‘region’ is what we perceive and thus is not necessarily what is defined on the map and/or based on mere strategic considerations. Therefore, although geography is still an important factor, this element has become more flexible and can be portrayed as a new element based on the need, identity and interests of a country, each time.

**New Regionalism: A Framework for Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Afghanistan**

The Iranian and Russian Empires have been collaborating and interacting with each other for more than five centuries. Moreover, their relationship has had its ups and downs. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s together with the formation of The Russian Federation created an opportunity for new relations between the two countries. This event, along with some regional and international changes, has paved the way for a relationship based on cooperation.

Although contact between Iran and Russia in various fields seemed friendly over the past twenty-five years, a stable collaborative dialogue was never formed...
between them at a regional level due to each party’s definition of interests, framework, and forming structures.

Russia and Iran are considered the owners of substantial oil and gas reserves in the economic arena which would give them a competitive advantage in energy markets. However, even competing in the field of energy pipelines from the Central Asia and the Caspian Sea to the international markets, and building regional trade routes, reminiscent of the Silk Road’s time of prosperity, have not paved the way for regional economic collaboration between the two.

Needless to say, Russia would certainly want to continue its military superiority in the peripheral regions. In recent years, Iran’s access to advanced weapons was limited due to the rising tension between Iran and powerful Western governments; thus, the Iranians had to use domestically produced armaments and Russian or Chinese arms. The Russians also would want to continue their military collaboration with Iran and maintain selling armaments to the Iranians. However, this collaboration has not yet expanded military arrangements between the two at a regional level.

Moreover, there has not been much collaboration in terms of cultural and ideological issues between the two neighboring states in the recent years. Despite challenges and problems, Iran and Russia still have common interests at the regional and extra-regional levels which would provide them with an opportunity to work together.

One of the main incentives for their partnership would reveal itself in Russia’s approach for establishing a multilateral structure at an international level. After the collapse of the Soviet Union followed by changes in structure of the international system, Russia once again attempted to define its superiority in a new framework in order to acquire its former position in the international system by pursuing ideas such as Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism. Russia’s attempt for maintaining its authoritative presence in a region dubbed as ‘Near Abroad’, the newly independent republics, indicates the pursuit of such policies by the Kremlin.

Iran has always followed a confrontational approach towards the West over the past decades and therefore can be considered a reliable peer. Iran’s and Russia’s belief in the necessity of establishing an international system based on multilateralism and also their common belief in countering the West’s attempts to establish its superiority have led them to collaborate at the level of regional institutions. Based on this new approach, all the global and regional powers would try to resolve common problems by following an agreed-upon framework in a noncompeting and collaborative way. In fact, the common threats against the interests of the two at a regional level have made them work together. Examples of such threats can be seen in the Enlargement Policy of the North Atlantic Treaty organization (NATO), continued since 1993.

Moreover, the existence of intra–regional threats like the establishment of religious extremist groups such as the Taliban, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and drug trafficking mafia causing insecurity and instability along and within the borders of Central Asian countries and the Caucasus, would bring the two coun-
tries closer in terms of their regional positions and joint attempt for finding a solution to handle these crises.

Joint collaboration in resolving the regional crises in countries such as Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Afghanistan is an indicative example of Iranian–Russian partnership. Moreover, the two countries’ collaborative efforts to prevent the promotion of ethnic and religious separatist demands in the region are important parts of this collaboration.

Therefore, the geopolitical pragmatism and the definition of identity and norms governing the foreign policy of the two countries in the international relations would make them work together in regard to both regional and extra-regional affairs.

Afghanistan is a familiar territory for Iran and Russia. The cultural, historical, and identity ties between the Iranians and the Afghans have created such unity between the two nations for thousands of years that sometimes they can be hardly distinguished from each other. The Russians in the contemporary era and during the establishment of the communist government in Kabul in particular, have had a strong presence in the Afghan society, and therefore played an important role in shaping the society’s political structures as well as its transition towards modern institutions and structures.

Although it was expected that after the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Iran and Russia would play a vital role in organizing the new political regime, their presence brought about several distinct attempts in some areas and not in the form of a regional collaboration.

In fact, in the post–Taliban period, the countries that were not directly involved in the conflict with the fundamentalist extremist groups could hardly participate in Afghanistan since the Taliban was removed from power by the help of NATO and the US–led coalition forces. Although Iran and Russia considered the Taliban their enemy and were indirectly cooperating with the international coalition groups, the new government in Kabul failed to cooperate effectively with the two countries. Furthermore, the United States and its allies were not welcoming towards other regional and international powers in Afghanistan. As a result, Russia which sought to establish military bases in Afghanistan in order to help generate security and stability, especially in the northern parts of it, failed to obtain a good relationship with Karzai’s government. Consequently, since the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were implementing security in Afghanistan for more than a decade, Russian merchants and investors did not trust the Afghan markets for investing or trading; therefore, they are now playing a minor role in Afghanistan’s economic structure.

At the same time, Iran which has formally and repeatedly called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, could not establish a collaborative relationship with the international groups on the Afghan soil. Moreover, Iranian goods gained a favorable position in the Afghan markets due to the vicinity, presence of millions of Afghans in Iran, and the cost-effectiveness of exporting these goods to Afghan cities for both sides. This turned Iran into one of the main exporters of
consumer goods and energy to Afghan cities; however, Iran could not acquire a favorable position in the long-term investment of Afghanistan’s key industries. In the current years, China is considered the major exporter of goods to Afghan markets and India is also regarded as one of the major investors in various industrial sectors of Afghanistan.

Furthermore, parts of Afghanistan turned into utopia for extremist and fundamentalist groups because of the growing tensions in the region and the continuous insecurity in the country caused by the emergence of extremist Islamic groups like ISIS. This is a serious security threat for Iran and Russia. Both states have always tried to communicate with the Afghan government and some branches of Taliban to prevent ISIS from infiltrating into the Central Asia as well as their own territories. However, the political authorities in Kabul believe that Iran and Russia could cause further regional instability and weaken the Afghan government against the extremist groups. Moreover, Kabul demands that regional and international powers support the country’s legitimate government in defeating the extremist and terrorist groups.

Afghan authorities believe that fundamentalism in Afghanistan had more to do with the economic difficulties and way of life along with the existing deprivation in various remote urban and rural regions than any ideological reasons. According to their argument, the best way to weaken the fundamentalist groups is by raising the quality of life of Afghans. Therefore, investing in various sectors of the country’s economy and increasing employment and income could help to create political stability, economic growth and also increase social security in the fragile Afghan nation.

Iran and Russia, as two powerful countries in the area of regional cooperation at the Eurasian level, certainly can play an important role in the development of Afghanistan’s economy in an effort to stabilize the country. This could happen either by tripartite cooperation or within a new cooperative framework with the help of countries such as India and Kazakhstan resulting in several benefits: first, increasing the stability and security of the region; second, the long-term benefits of the economic sectors from the investment in Afghanistan; and third, this cooperation is in line with the identity and nature of these countries’ foreign policy that seek to establish a multipolar international system. Therefore, cooperation with Afghanistan in the economic area as well as strengthening its government against the extremist groups could be effective in increasing stability and regional security as well as securing the national interests of Iran and Russia in both aspects.

**Conclusion**

It might have been expected that a ‘New Great Game’ would develop in post-Soviet Eurasia in which not only global powers but the regional ones, namely China, Iran, Turkey, Russia and India would vie with each other for greater influence in the newly independent states of Central Asia. While a lighter version of such new great game has played in the region, it is, indeed, not that much ‘great’ as had been expected. Instead of rivalry, the regional states have attempted to
stabilize these newly independent states aimed at territorial security at home and institution-building abroad.

At the turn of century, with respect to common considerations in their foreign policies, Iran and Russia definitively proved that both states are seeking cooperation rather than rivalry and hostility. From the Iranian perspective, Russia is a strategically capable actor enjoying a powerful seat in the United Nations (UN), supplier of a part of Iranian military equipment and among the major states implementing the Joint comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). To Russian decision makers, Iran is regional power holding many cards in the region. In that regard, Moscow requires Tehran partnership within the regional arrangements in order to take both benefit of Iran’s capabilities in the region and contain the possible damage it could render to Russia’s regional interests.

In sum, this regional interdependence developed from regional institution/organization establishments is clearly demonstrating the conciliatory approach of the powerful states in Eurasia for the sake of collective interests and security. It goes without saying that cooperation for the expansion of security in the region after US-led forces left Afghanistan in 2014 can also cultivate another field for regional integration among Iran, Russia and other neighboring states of Afghanistan.
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