

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Iran-Taliban Cooperation: New Dimension in Afghan Conflict?

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

Following the killing of the Taliban Chief Akhtar Mansoor, Taliban's relationship, and cooperation with the Shia majority Iran has emerged as a new dimension of the Afghan conflict. Cooperation between the two old-foes defies historical geopolitical and geo-sectarian trends.

Commentary

AGAINST THE backdrop of the killing of Taliban Chief Akhtar Mansoor, one development that has particularly puzzled policymakers and veteran observers of the Afghan conflict was his frequent trips to Iran. At the time of his death, Mansoor entered the Pakistani territory from the Iranian border crossing at Taftan. The passport found in his possession — which miraculously remained intact — showed entry and exit stamps of his travels to Iran. According to some media reports, before taking him out in Balochistan, the US was tracking Mansoor's movement from Iran.

Some reports indicate that Mansoor travelled to Iran for medical treatment. Others maintain, he probably went there to visit his family. Still others point out that he was in Iran to hold meetings with the Taliban officials who run two Taliban offices in the Iranian city of Zahedan.

Old-foes turned Allies

The nature and scale of cooperation between the Taliban and Iran warrants a deeper examination to provide us with a better understanding of the Afghan conflict. If it is true that Iran provided information of Mansoor's movement to the US — a charge which Iran denies — then is it right to assume that the relationship between Iran and

Taliban is changing negatively? Moreover, has the recent signing of the Chahbahar Port agreement between India, Iran, and Afghanistan brought Tehran closer to Kabul while pushing it away from the Taliban?

Historically, the relationship between Iran and the Taliban has remained hostile and adversarial. Iran is a Shiite majority state while the Taliban are an orthodox Sunni-Deobandi group. In 1998, the two almost went to war over the killing of eight Iranian diplomats in northern Afghanistan's Mazar-i-Sharif city. Iran deployed more than 70,000 troops along its border with Afghanistan and threatened to invade the country.

During its rule in Afghanistan, the Taliban also provided shelter to Saudi Arabia-backed anti-Iranian militant groups like Jandullah and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. On the contrary, during the Taliban rule, Iran supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance Group.

In addition, Iran tacitly supported the US intervention in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks which resulted in the downfall of the Taliban government. Iran also shared intelligence with the US about locations of Taliban leaders resulting in their detention or elimination. Iran also played a pivotal role in the formulation of the post-Taliban government of Hamid Karzai.

Growing Cooperation Between Old-foes

Iran covertly cultivated ties with the Taliban after US slapped sanction on Iran over its secret nuclear programme. The Iranian outreach to the Taliban was grounded in its fears of encirclement by US troops from Afghanistan and the Middle East. To fend off the US forces stationed in Afghanistan, Iran provided weapons, financial assistance, and shelter to the Taliban. By extending a helping hand to the Taliban, Iran's intention was to create a buffer zone between its border with Afghanistan and US the military bases in the country.

Notwithstanding the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, the US-Iran relations are less than ideal. Policies and interests of US and Iran widely diverge over the Syrian conflict. Iran, along with Russia and China, supports the Assad regime in Syria, which the US-led Western bloc opposes along with Turkey and the Sunni sheikhdoms of the Middle East.

Iranian cooperation with the Taliban is also part of its hedging strategy to keep multiple options open in case of another civil war in Afghanistan. Considering the political challenges confronting the embattled Afghan Unity government and the emboldened Taliban insurgency, Iran deems it essential to keep a window of cooperation open with Taliban - arguably Afghanistan's most powerful political and militant group.

On the contrary, Taliban's willingness to cooperate with its old political rival is rooted in the plans to diversify its options rather than rely on Pakistan. The decision was also prompted by the Taliban leadership's desire to keep their political and organisational freedom intact rather than following the dictates of Pakistan's military establishment. Last year in July, when Pakistan exerted too much pressure on the

Taliban to join the Afghan peace talks against their will, the Taliban leadership at one point signalled a preference to leave Pakistan rather than joining the peace talks.

The IS Factor

Several Taliban leaders and fighters are already weary of tight controls exerted on them by Pakistan. Tensions also grew between Taliban and Pakistan over the mysterious deaths of two Taliban leaders Mullah Obaidullah Akhund and Ustad Yasir in the custody of the Pakistani security agencies in 2010 and 2012, respectively. At the same time, Taliban were also concerned about the arrest of several Taliban leaders in Pakistan including Mullah Ghani Bradar, Mullah Hassan Rahmani and Agha Jan Motasim.

Another common factor that prompted the two old political opponents to cooperate was the emergence of IS-Khurasan — the Afghanistan affiliate of Islamic State. Since its emergence, IS-Khurasan has grown in size, number, and strength in eastern Afghanistan. The development not only undermines Taliban's unrivalled monopoly over Afghanistan's jihadist landscape but it also poses a potential threat to Iran. Given Iran's deep involvement against IS in Iraq and Syria, IS considers Iran its bitter enemy, even making several public statements to "transform Iran into pools of blood".

If Iran withdraws its support from the Taliban and extends cooperation with Afghanistan and US, then Afghanistan would enter a new phase of conflict. In such a scenario, drone strikes and military operations against the Taliban will increase. Given limitations and repeated failure of the military approach to bring peace in Afghanistan, the country needs a fresh political approach rather than reinforcing a failed strategy all over again.

Abdul Basit is an Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He can be reached at isabasit@ntu.edu.sg

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg