**Afghanistan: Proxy Conflicts**

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The proxy warfare includes external support for a faction engaged in a civil war, national liberation movement, or assistance to a national revolt against foreign occupation. Proxy wars remain one of the major categories of conflicts that contribute to humanitarian crises around the world. Iran and Pakistan may be happy to have the US troops gone from its borders, but the reconstituted Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan poses another set of challenges that decision-makers are reluctant to openly debate. Iran and Afghanistan’s governments were sworn enemies in the late 1990s when the Pashtun-dominated Taliban were in power during the final phase of the Afghan civil war. This was an ethnic conflict just as much as a religious one. In 1998, Iran and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan nearly went to war after the killing of several Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Mazar-i-Sharif. However, when the US invaded Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and al-Qaeda in 2001, Iran tacitly cooperated and supplied the US military with selected battlefield intelligence.

Today, the pondering issues pertain to the state of relations between Afghanistan’s Sunni-led government and Iran’s Shia theocracy? On what issues do they collaborate? On what issues are they divided? Iran and Afghanistan have connections spanning over centuries as neighbours with a 585-mile frontier. Although Tehran and Kabul have a relatively strong relationship today, yet tensions persist over Iran’s interference in Afghanistan through sponsored proxies. Iran is predominantly Shia while Afghanistan’s population is at least 80 per cent Sunni. The sectarian divide was not a large source of tension and at times, Tehran allied with Sunni Tajiks and Pashtuns. Iran’s relationship with the Afghans loosened for the prolonged stay of the US military in Afghanistan after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Tehran viewed the Taliban as a useful tool to counter the US influence on the Iranian borders and consequently provided Taliban forces with enough military equipment to pressure the United States, but at the same time not enough to generate American military retaliation against Iran.

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Indeed, Iranian leaders are keen on protecting Shia Muslim communities in Afghanistan-an estimated 15 to 20 per cent of the total population. It has not tried to fundamentally disrupt Afghan politics but primarily builds influence by investing through indirect means as part of a multi-pronged strategy, whether intervening directly working with the Taliban, or trying to preserve the status quo. Iran might also see the latest developments in the region as an opportunity to increase its local influence and score points against the United States. Tehran respects the Taliban’s resilience, and notwithstanding their ideological differences, they have a lot in common, including their radical views and hostility toward America. This affinity could pave the way toward future strategic cooperation, provided the Taliban government is willing to give credible guarantees for safeguarding the interests of Afghan Shia. Iranian and Taliban officials may decide to limit these concerns by sustaining de facto de-confliction and cooperating on the tactical level. Serious consideration should also be given to the possibility that Tehran envisions the “Syrianification” or “Iraqification” of Afghanistan, perhaps by using proxy militias to set up a Shia haven at selected places in Afghanistan to serve Tehran’s strategic objective of becoming a regional hegemon.

Pakistan shares a long boundary with Afghanistan, and the rise of the Taliban aggravates fear and a sense of insecurity among non-Pashtun ethnic communities, leading to inter-tribal militia conflicts particularly in Baluchistan. Nevertheless, there is Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which is different from the Afghan Taliban governing Afghanistan. The TTP is notorious for anti-state activities and wants to enforce a harsher and controversial Sharia rule than what is currently in force in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Pakistan is well aware of its strategic significance to the US despite its links with the Taliban government. This in turn will maintain Pakistan’s leverage with the US over its future dealings with Afghanistan. Additionally, Beijing, Pakistan’s biggest ally, has demonstrated the enthusiasm and keenness to work with the Taliban government. Therefore, in addition to Pakistan’s desire for regional influence, its Islamic roots and its concerns over Pashtun nationalism, it will continue to support the Afghan government simply because it can.

China shares a small boundary line with Afghanistan through its restive Xinjiang province. There have been reports that the Taliban are sympathetic to Uighur Muslims groups opposed to the Chinese communist regime. China fears that the Taliban, once stabilised in Afghanistan, may help the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The ETIM was banned by the US in 2006 when it declared the outfit as one of the deadliest terror organisations but revoked in 2020 by the Donald Trump administration.

There is a strong lobby group in the US that favours a long-term plan for proxy warfare over the employment of regular troops to achieve the strategic objectives. Likewise, Pakistan and India have had their favourites in Afghanistan, and both have a long history of fighting proxy wars against each other. India has openly opposed the Taliban during the last 20 years and projected them as Pakistan’s proxy. With the Taliban’s return to power, the risks are high for another round of the India-Pakistan proxy war in Afghanistan.

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