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IRAN AND THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POWERS IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE US WITHDRAWAL

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Abstract

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021 is a significant turning point in the history of Afghanistan, ending a complex and long period of American control over the course of Afghan politics. Accordingly, Afghanistan and its neighbors, particularly Iran, embarked on a new strategic game in Central Asian, with its features still not apparent. It is clear that Iran has prepared well for America's withdrawal from Afghanistan by building relations with the Taliban, enhancing its economic and cultural influence inside the country, and establishing alliances with China and Pakistan. Nevertheless, Iran anticipates potential challenges and intersections with other regional players, namely Turkey, India and perhaps with some Gulf countries. Expecting a potential strategic vacuum in Afghanistan following America's withdrawal may lead us to an inaccurate reading of the current and upcoming phase in Afghanistan. Washington did not completely withdraw from the Afghan battlefield. Its impact in the country will remain in place via some neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, Iran and perhaps Turkey. These countries will play a functional role that may converge and intersect with the interests of Washington and other countries concerned with the Afghan file. Thus, Afghanistan will remain a complex arena, subject to change at any moment.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Taliban, and US withdrawal.*

Introduction

Iran is a significant country in Asia; it has tangled interests with many regional countries, most prominently with Afghanistan. This is due to Afghanistan's strategic location at the heart of the interactions in Central Asia and its ability to impact regional stability as a whole. The United States' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the presence of its troops there for nearly 20 years was a continuous concern for Iran. Undoubtedly, the US presence in Afghanistan and the consequent numerous and intertwined regional and international arrangements for nearly two decades posed many challenges to Iranian policy. Thus, it became necessary for Iran to adapt to the new emerging realities in Afghanistan. It has become, over time, an important arena for testing strategic balances in Asia and an indicator of the cooperation and conflict trends between the regional powers surrounding Afghanistan, including Iran, of course. Afghanistan has remained an arena for testing international relations between major powers such as Russia, China, the EU, NATO, Japan and others.

Undoubtedly, the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of August 2021 marks the beginning of a new chapter not only in Afghanistan's history, but also for regional security and the balance of power equation in Asia generally, and Central Asia particularly. Therefore, to understand, analyze and forecast Iran's role in regional and international interactions surrounding Afghanistan during the current period, one needs to review the regional and international polarization regarding Afghanistan before Washington's withdrawal, and to identify the opportunities or challenges for stakeholders. This paper discusses in detail the expected Iranian position on the upcoming developments in Afghanistan, attempting to identify the potential regional and international consensus points regarding Afghanistan's future; the expected differences; and the possible change in the nature of the regional and international balance of power equation in regard to the Afghan file particularly and Central Asia generally.

This paper aims to answer two main questions: how will the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan impact Iran's strategic vision towards the country and the availability of opportunities for cooperation and the prospect of conflict between regional and international powers wanting to fill the perceived strategic vacuum in the country (Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Britain, and France)? How will Iran deal with the powers concerned with Afghanistan that hope to play a new role in the country such as Turkey and Qatar?

1. The General Picture of the Regional Scene Around Afghanistan Before the United States' Withdrawal

To better understand the reality in Afghanistan, one should understand the regional and international arrangements in the past years, whether these relate to the United States' exertions that led to its expected withdrawal from the country (it had been previously and openly discussed by former US President Barack Obama, former US President Donald Trump, as well as by the current US President Joe Biden); or the efforts of other countries such as Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India to carve out a role in the country, either independently or via certain regional arrangements.⁽¹⁾

In addition, for a full picture and better understanding of Iran's potential position on Afghanistan, this paper addresses the regional and international interactions before America's withdrawal.

1.1 Washington's Acceptance and Recognition of Regional Powers' Interest

Past conflicts in Afghanistan have historically had an international rather than a regional dimension. Before the United States got involved in the country, Afghanistan had been caught within a cycle of historical conflict between Britain and Russia. Later, it was part of the Cold War struggles between the United States and the former Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. This struggle between the two great powers contributed to Afghanistan's colonial legacy, with little contribution from regional countries. By the end of its withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington accepted the role of other actors in the country, including Iran. Sometimes it encouraged some regional actors, such as Pakistan and Turkey, to play a certain role to complement its plan, such as hosting talks with the Taliban to press the movement to stop the civil war and embrace the political path leading to peace.⁽²⁾

By leaving room for other countries in Afghanistan, Washington has changed its initial strategy from when it first entered the country. Back then, it relied on exploiting the differences between the countries concerned with Afghanistan, without involving them in managing the country's affairs during its occupation. At the regional level, the United States has exploited the rivalry between India and Pakistan to place pressure on Islamabad via opening up space for New Delhi's expansion in Afghanistan. The United States also encouraged Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to play a role in influencing the Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen communities in Afghanistan. As for Iran, the United States took advantage of the differences between the Taliban and Tehran to secure Iranian support for its invasion of Afghanistan, hence it eliminated Iran's strategic opposition. This is reflective of Washington's use of Iran in Afghanistan given its ability to influence the position of Shiite Hazaras in the country like the green light given to Iran in Iraq.⁽³⁾

1.2 The Intensification of International Competition in Afghanistan

Before America's withdrawal, many international players were involved in Afghanistan; the conflict over the country was no longer limited to two countries (the United States and the former Soviet Union) – as before - but now included Russia, the NATO member countries, China, Japan, Germany and other European countries such as the Netherlands and Austria. Unlike the early years of the Afghan war, the situation before Washington's withdrawal saw cooperation and flexibility between the United States and its international rivals with regard to managing their respective interests. The United States allowed Britain and France to play an important role in Afghanistan, either independently with both countries supporting the political system via supervising Afghan general elections or under the umbrella of NATO. Countries such as Japan and Germany called for sending troops to join the coalition forces in Afghanistan. There was also apparent cooperation with Russia when Moscow allowed the passage of US supply planes through its airspace thus saving them from potential attacks if they passed via Pakistan and Afghan territories. In return, Russia secured arms contracts, supplying the Afghan army and police with weapons.⁽⁴⁾

1.3 The Growing Importance of Afghanistan for Iran and Regional Countries

Over the past two decades, Afghanistan has developed a significant position in Central Asia, especially as an energy transfer route. Furthermore, strategic cooperation projects that have been implemented during the past years, whether between Pakistan and China, or India and Iran, have bolstered Afghanistan's regional position. This has brought Afghanistan into the strategic calculations of the aforementioned countries, due to its strategic location, as it occupies an important geostrategic position. Owing to its central location within Asia, Afghanistan and the wider region of Central Asia are pivotal in providing access to other regions. The late Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book "The Grand Chessboard" published in 1997, mentioned that Afghanistan and Central Asia constitute a "geopolitical pivot." Brzezinski explains, "Geopolitical pivots are the states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behavior of geostrategic players." Afghanistan's significance, according to an energy perspective, is its geographical location, which can be a transit corridor for oil and natural gas exports from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea. This includes the possibility for constructing pipelines to export oil and natural gas through Afghanistan. Moreover, the country has vast natural resources, namely oil and gas, gold, copper, iron, cobalt and lithium, as well as uranium and rare earth elements.⁽⁵⁾

2. Iran's Strategic and Tactical Preparations

It seems that Iran had prepared for the moment when Washington would eventually withdraw from Afghanistan. The withdrawal took place at the end of August 2021. It was chaotic to a great extent. The Iranian celebration following the withdrawal was not surprising. Tehran attempted to exploit the withdrawal politically and militarily to demonstrate "the power of resistance," and to blame the United States and its allies for Afghanistan's predicament. The chaotic US withdrawal led international media outlets and some European politicians to describe the withdrawal as "shameful" and they criticized Washington directly and indirectly. Iran also took advantage of this major event to pressure Washington in other countries such as Iraq and Syria, and it began to talk about the fate of governments and leaders who cooperate with US occupying forces in Iraq.

Iranian celebrations over America's withdrawal did not last long. A few weeks after the withdrawal, Iran faced a new and complex reality in Afghanistan. Thus, Iran had to alter its strategy and manage its relations with the Taliban as well as with regional and international powers vying to "fill the strategic vacuum" in the country. Iran's leadership is well aware that the international and regional game in Afghanistan has just begun following Washington's withdrawal, which was the orchestrator of the balance of power equation on the ground as it was the dominant power in the country.

In light of the above, it is important to understand how Iran prepared for America's withdrawal and how it will deal with the future realities in Afghanistan. In addition, it is critical to look at how Iran will manage the balance of power equation in light of the competition between regional and international players involved in the country.

2.1 Strategic Considerations Regarding Iran's Exertions in Afghanistan

Iran has embraced a relatively constant strategic line towards Afghanistan to achieve the following goals:

- Strengthen the fragile security equation in Afghanistan (especially at the economic level).^{(6)*}
- Strengthen its alliances with some Afghan communities such as the Hazaras and Tajiks to prevent Afghanistan's unrest spilling over to Iran.
- Boost ties with the western Afghan provinces bordering it to make them dependent on its electricity, fuel and cross-border trade, as is the case with Iraq now.^{(7)*}
- Ensure the establishment of a central government in Kabul that is able to manage domestic affairs and extend its writ, especially within territories bordering it, however, without allowing the establishment of a strong Afghan state, which could potentially pose a threat to it. (It is worth mentioning that

relations between Iran and Afghanistan during the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in Kandahar, were hostile). Prevent any regional or international power from turning Afghanistan into a base.⁽⁸⁾

- Stand against any attempts to dismember Afghanistan into small states, i.e., prevent the redrawing of the regional map by creating newer smaller states such as: the Pashtun state or the Baloch state, which would threaten the complex structure of Iran.

2.2 Iran's Tactics to Establish Influence Inside and Around Afghanistan

To implement its aforementioned strategic vision, Iran opened up greatly to Afghanistan in the post-2001 period, and took advantage of the tense relations between Kabul and Islamabad due to the latter's support for the Taliban. This was reflected via several tactical and strategic steps undertaken by Iran, such as the following:

- Granting Afghanistan a permit to use Chabahar port on the Gulf of Oman for transit purposes.

- Financing and building expensive infrastructure projects, such as constructing a bridge and building the main road linking Chabahar with the Afghan border.

- Involving India in a project linking Afghanistan to Chabahar port, which allows New Delhi to bypass Pakistan and access Afghanistan and Central Asia (through establishing the Delaram-Zaranj Highway, a trade route that competes with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwadar port in Balochistan).

- The inauguration of the first railway line in December 2020, funded by Tehran, linking the city of Khuff in northeastern Iran and Gurian city in western Afghanistan, which is 140 kilometers long.

- Establishing other infrastructure, educational, and cultural projects and communication channels such as television stations, which were partially or wholly funded by Tehran, to influence the perspectives of Afghanistan's elite and to co-opt the Afghan street.

- Rapprochement with the Taliban and overcoming their differences, establishing hospitals to treat wounded Taliban fighters, sending some Taliban members to Iranian hospitals for treatment, and providing them with weapons and training. The ice has melted to such an extent that Tehran pays the salaries of Taliban fighters in some areas, such as Farah, according to the statement of a former Taliban official provided to a local Afghan radio station.⁽⁹⁾

It is clear from the aforementioned that the Iranian calculations in Afghanistan are more complex than one can imagine. This may explain the reasons behind Iran's attempt to build good relations with the Taliban in recent years particularly. In 2016, Iran hosted the former Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour who was killed in a US drone strike in a remote

area of southwest Pakistan, near the Afghan border. This was followed by meetings which were made public when the Iranian Foreign Ministry hosted a dialogue session with political leaders affiliated with the Taliban in January 2021. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif participated in this session. This was considered at the time as Iran shifting from a policy of coordination to a policy of diplomacy towards the Taliban to contain it. Some decision-making institutions in Iran showed a sympathetic attitude towards the Taliban. Ahmad Naderi, a member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security Committee, announced in October 2020 that Tehran needed to reconsider its position on the Taliban, as the movement is deeply and widely rooted in Afghan society. An IRGC commander highlighted the common interests between the Taliban and Iran; opposing the US presence in the region. *Kayhan* newspaper, affiliated with the Supreme Leader's Office, and which reflects the thinking of Iran's decision-makers, talked about the qualitative change in the nature of the Taliban, stressing that the movement is no longer the same extremist entity that governed the country in the past. It also mentioned incidents verifying this change. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said to Tasnim News Agency, affiliated with the IRGC, during an interview that the movement "guarantees that its Shiite brothers will not be discriminated against," indicating that the movement had changed its perspective from what it held in 2000.⁽¹⁰⁾

2.3 The Iranian Position After the United States' Withdrawal

The political system in Tehran welcomed the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, and considered it a victory for the "Axis of Resistance." In addition, it considered it a victory for its objective to expel US troops from near its borders. Despite celebrating the US withdrawal, Iranian decision-makers found themselves facing various worries; including: threats facing Iranian interests following the Taliban taking over power in the country, the likelihood of new disturbance zones arising near the Afghan-Iran border, and multiple economic and security ramifications in light of the new Afghan developments. The Taliban's dominance over the joint border crossings with Iran has increased Iranian political and security concerns in spite of the movement's recent efforts to reassure its neighbors, including Iran. Tehran is still apprehensive about the Taliban as it adopts a hardline Sunni ideology; competing with Iran's *Wilayat al-Faqih* doctrine. Iran's concerns about the Taliban are due to the movement's nature, ideology, and the complexities of dealing with it.⁽¹¹⁾

In terms of dealing with the new developments in Afghanistan, opinion in Tehran is divided into two: one opinion supports the idea of rapprochement with the Taliban, and finding ways to deal with it. The other opinion is in complete opposition to the first, and followers of this opinion have called

on the Iranian government to adopt a rejectionist and anti-Taliban position towards the movement's "absolute" control over Afghan territories. ⁽¹²⁾

It seems that the most realistic opinion is the one that underscores the need to soften Iran's position towards the Taliban, cooperate with it to prevent the rise of ISKP (Islamic State-Khorasan Province) near Iran's borders, and to support its position towards US forces to expel them completely from Afghanistan. This is in addition to thwarting proposals to bring back US troops indirectly; like the Turkish proposal to securitize Kabul Airport.

Given the uncertainty, Iran undertook several steps in September 2021, including the evacuation of its consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif, although the Taliban stated that it would respect diplomatic missions, the Iranian army and the IRGC, declaring a high alert status on the country's eastern borders after the Taliban seized control of Herat's border crossing, and dispatching further military equipment to the border areas. Iran supplied the fifth air defense base and the 14th air base of the Iranian army in Mashhad, including attack helicopters and reconnaissance aircraft, and two squadrons of F-5 and Mirage F1 EQ/BQ. This Iranian move is a hedging step to mobilize forces in preparation for any emergency situation, and potential shifts in the Taliban's positions which might impact Tehran's interests such as moving closer to Pakistan or Saudi Arabia

Obviously, Iran, in the short and medium term, will be keen to encourage the Taliban to open up to other political forces, to achieve a level of stability there, thereby preventing the country from sliding into another cycle of civil strife; the most significant immediate threat to Iran as this would increase the number of Afghan immigrants to Iranian territories — adding another source of security and social concern. In addition, the instability on the border with Afghanistan will be another concern for Iran as it will lead to the smuggling of weapons and drugs and will consequently destabilize the security and economic situation in Balochistan. The instability resulting from another cycle of civil strife in Afghanistan will have a negative impact on the Iranian economy, due to the suspension or decline of exports to Afghanistan, which amounted to \$2.3 billion during the last Iranian year while other sources indicate that it reached \$4 billion. This placed Kabul in fifth place on the list of Iranian trade destinations.

3. Interests of Regional Powers and Their Visions for the Post-US Withdrawal Phase in Afghanistan

Undoubtedly, a large part of the current phase of the intersections of regional interests in Afghanistan was established in the pre-withdrawal period through the efforts of some countries, including Pakistan, China, India and others. These efforts were closely connected to the perspectives of each country in line with their respective interests. According to these countries, Afghanistan

is a potential threat or opportunity to access, expand and perhaps enjoy greater regional influence. The perspectives of the most important regional stakeholders in Afghanistan are summarized as follows:

3.1 Pakistan

Afghanistan is one of the most important arenas for Pakistan's regional role since it is a neighboring country. It shares a 2,400-kilometer border with Afghanistan. Pakistan also hosts nearly 1.4 million Afghan refugees. It is one of the countries that has the strongest relations with the Taliban. The movement merged in northern Pakistan at the beginning of the 1990s. Pakistan maintained its relations with the Taliban except during the early years of the US occupation since Pakistan supported the United States' efforts to overthrow the movement.⁽¹³⁾

■ **The recognition of the Taliban:** With regard to recognizing the Taliban government in Afghanistan, Pakistani Minister of Information Fawad Chaudhry said that any recognition of the Taliban administration "will be a regional decision" taken after consultations with regional and international powers.⁽¹⁴⁾ He wrote a lengthy article in *The Washington Post* explaining his country's vision for the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan, acknowledging that "in the past Pakistan made a mistake by choosing between warring Afghan parties." He also mentioned that this mistake will never happen again.⁽¹⁵⁾ Some observers believe that this acknowledgement reflects Pakistan's willingness to build ties with the Taliban again.

■ **Pakistani concern about Iranian moves:** Pakistan will work to win over the Taliban, and shift it from Iran's predominant hegemony. Iran's access to Pakistan's northern borders, a region of a complex Afghan-Pakistani sectarian mix with a history of conflict, may pose a threat to the stability of the country.

■ **The ideal option for Pakistan:** The best future scenario for Pakistan is having a weak Afghan government, with no nationalistic tendencies among Pashtun tribes, meaning that they will not ask for establishing their own state.

■ **Possible option in the short term:** The possible option at the moment and likely to be played by Pakistan inside Afghanistan is to support the Taliban's accession to power, but with the prominent political participation of various parties and other local groups, such as representatives of the former government, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and others. This type of coalition government will eventually be able to secure international legitimacy, meaning that Kabul will easily receive international support and allow it to stabilize the situation in the country. This will enable Pakistan to achieve its economic and strategic goals and counter Indian and Iranian moves, or at least balance them.

■ **Rebuilding influence:** Pakistan believes that it can rebuild its influence with the Taliban since trade in Afghanistan mostly takes place through Pakistan,

including basic products such as flour, rice, vegetables, cement and building materials. In addition, Pakistan wants to establish an economic bridge with the Central Asian republics via Afghanistan, thereby helping to connect the country to the wider region's economy. This economic dependency could encourage the Taliban to cooperate with Pakistan on a range of issues, including security.

■ **Reducing Indian influence in Afghanistan:** Given the Pakistani desire to get closer to the Taliban, Islamabad will be able to significantly increase its influence and strengthen its strategic depth in comparison to India. Furthermore, Islamabad will try to control the internal tensions of the Baloch minority, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Army of Jhangvi) and the Pakistani Taliban. In fact, Taliban control means less influence for India in the country. Pakistan was particularly troubled by the presence of Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar. It has always perceived this presence as an Indian way to support anti-Pakistan elements, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (the Pakistani Taliban) in the north and various Baloch rebel groups in the south.

■ **Prospective role of the Taliban in decreasing terrorist threats against Pakistan:** Pakistan mainly wants to achieve one aim from its relationship with the new Kabul administration ; to avert terrorist attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan from its safe havens within Afghan territories.

■ **Including Afghanistan in the Pakistan-China Axis:** Islamabad wants Kabul to join the massive China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, which includes infrastructure projects worth \$62 billion.

3.2 India

The rise of the Taliban after America's withdrawal undoubtedly has been a source of great concern for New Delhi. India fears that a possible rapprochement between the Taliban and Pakistan will undermine its presence in Afghanistan. The signs of discomfort were clear during the withdrawal process, as India evacuated its entire diplomatic staff, which included more than 190 employees from the Afghan capital, Kabul.

Against the backdrop of the recent developments in Afghanistan and the Taliban's control over Afghanistan, the Indian government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces trouble because New Delhi has adopted an anti-Taliban policy for decades. Nevertheless, all indicators show that the Indian government will remain open, waiting, and anticipating the Taliban's next steps during the transitional period and beyond, especially regarding potential levels of rapprochement between the Taliban, Pakistan, and China.

Some Indian circles fear that Indian investments in Afghanistan are at risk now that the Taliban are in power. During the past two decades, Indian investments in Afghanistan amounted to more than \$3 billion, i.e., 2.6 billion

euros in the infrastructure sector, including more than 400 projects across Afghanistan.⁽¹⁶⁾

India is perhaps one of the biggest losers from the recent developments in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban. From New Delhi's perspective, what happened is a victory for radical extremism which is problematic for India and could result in hostilities. The Taliban will not hesitate to carry out terrorist operations inside India, according to its calculations. Observers believe that Afghanistan under the Taliban will pose security challenges to India. Over the years, anti-Indian armed groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed have been operating along the Afghan-Pakistan border. From the border region, these groups have launched attacks in India. In the wake of the Taliban's control of Afghanistan, these groups are likely to become more emboldened, seize more territories and increase their influence, leading to further attacks against India.⁽¹⁷⁾

3.3 Turkey

Despite its geographical distance from Afghanistan, Turkey managed to become a regional player in Afghanistan, either by joining NATO forces operating in Afghanistan before the US withdrawal, or through securitizing and re-opening Kabul Airport in cooperation with Qatar.⁽¹⁸⁾

Apparently, Turkey will try to keep some military presence in Afghanistan and will try to persuade the Taliban to accept its role. Qatar may assist the Turks in this. There is talk about a deal between Turkey and Afghanistan that will have many political, strategic and military dimensions. There is also talk about material, political, and logistical support for Afghanistan so Ankara can play a greater role in the post-US and NATO withdrawal period.⁽¹⁹⁾ Turkey seeks to use its presence at Kabul Airport to support its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Kabul Airport is a vital and pivotal area to secure diplomatic missions and official state organs and ensure the delivery of aid and relief operations. In addition, since Turkey logistically operates the airport, it can use this as a pressure card or bargaining chip in its favor in the future, whether against international or domestic actors. It provides an opportunity for Turkey to strengthen its presence in Central Asia, enabling it to take part in the game of recalibrating the balance of power in the region, especially at the level of relations with Russia that have been tense lately due to Moscow's dissatisfaction over Ankara's role in the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and over a Turkish desire to establish a military base in Azerbaijan, which is considered a security threat to Russia.⁽²⁰⁾

3.4 The Gulf

The upcoming regional game in Afghanistan will clearly involve some Gulf states, especially Qatar. It has managed to build close relations with the

Taliban leaders in Doha, since allowing the movement to open an office in Doha in 2013. Relations were further enhanced when Qatar sponsored the negotiations between the movement and the United States, leading to the signing of the Afghanistan Peace Agreement in 2020. The Qatari role has emerged clearly following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Qatar and Turkey have also played a joint role; they coordinated their efforts at the political, security and military levels. This was reflected in their cooperation over operating Kabul Airport. There is also a great level of cooperation between the Taliban, Qatar and Turkey at the diplomatic level. Doha and Ankara play a mediating and coordinating role between the movement and the rest of the world. Therefore, we find that the Qatari political discourse on Afghanistan stresses the need to prevent the Taliban from being isolated, and encourages the international community to start dialogue with it. Qatar arranged several dialogues between the Taliban and some Western countries such as Germany and France. It is also significant that most European countries, along with the United States, will manage their diplomatic, consular and security affairs in Afghanistan through their offices in Doha. Reviewing Qatar's experience with the Taliban helps us to forecast clearly its future role in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have extensive experience in dealing with the Taliban since the 1990s, have a great chance to play an important role in the future of Afghanistan, especially in the economic sector and in supporting the Afghan political transition if the Taliban complies with its human rights commitments, avoids collaborating with extremist organizations, and is inclusive of all Afghan political forces in the government setup.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE decided to close their diplomatic missions in Kabul in mid-August 2021, indicating concern over the developments in the country. The scenario, back then, was not clear; anything was possible. The safety of their diplomats was a top priority, according to the two countries. Therefore, they decided to withdraw their diplomatic missions.

Some analysis indicates that the UAE's hosting of former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani may limit the room available for its future movement in Afghanistan, although the Emirati government confirmed that its hosting of Ghani was purely for humanitarian reasons. The same analysis indicates that the chances of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to play an important role in the future of Afghanistan are great, given its religious position as the center of the Islamic world and due to its influence among most Afghan factions. This could prompt Saudi Arabia to play a bigger role in the brotherly Muslim country. This analysis confirms that Riyadh has the strongest card to influence the Taliban's trends and perhaps direct it towards more moderation. The Taliban derives a great part of its legitimacy from its religious identity, especially in rural

areas of Afghanistan. Without any direct or indirect diplomatic engagement with Saudi Arabia, it may be difficult for Afghans to travel to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj or Umrah, thwarting the religious legitimacy of the Taliban.

The Afghan crisis, and Washington's withdrawal in particular, was an important test to see what help the Gulf states would provide to its allies, especially Washington, particularly regarding the evacuation and hosting of Afghan nationals and foreigners. However, the political power of the Gulf states is much more than just being mere transit centers for Afghan refugees. The UAE has already sent medical and food aid as part of its commitment to provide humanitarian assistance. Given the fact that foreign aid is a key element of Gulf development budgets, Gulf leaders can use their significant financial power to support development projects in Afghanistan, and help to improve the health sector. This will inevitably increase their political influence in Afghanistan.

4. The Interests of International Powers and Their Perspectives on the Future of Afghanistan

The convergence and divergence of interests of various international powers involved in Afghanistan during the current stage can be reviewed as follows:

4.1 American Interests

Washington did not leave Afghanistan until it signed a peace agreement with the Taliban last year. It provides for protecting the United States against any new danger emanating from Afghanistan. However, the United States will be in any case a major player in Afghanistan, although its forces withdrew, but normal relations with the Taliban government may be out of reach.

The United States' most likely concern is that Afghanistan will turn into a new sphere of regional and international conflict, where the interests of neighboring countries and great powers overlap. US Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan Ross Wilson warned by advising countries not to engage in "proxy wars," support Afghan stability, and disengage from any new cold war within the country.

The United States is unlikely to stir and escalate conflicts in Afghanistan, but rather will work to avert escalations and conflicts expanding into Central Asia. This is because many companies working to establish the Caspian Sea gas pipeline project are US companies.⁽²¹⁾

4.2 European Interests

Undoubtedly, some European powers have openly declared their dissatisfaction with the manner in which the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was carried out; it was done without sufficient coordination with Washington's European partners. Some European leaders, such as the former German Chancellor

Angela Merkel, regard this as an insult to Europe, and a move that was inconsistent with the spirit of the transatlantic partnership, and other European powers such as France viewed it as a continuation of America's unilateral approach to international relations which was apparent under the former US President Donald Trump.⁽²²⁾ The European position on the Afghan crisis can be explained as follows:

■ Europe's political position: It is based on interacting and holding talks with the Taliban at the present time, as it is the dominant party and the representative of Afghanistan currently. The European countries have set the following conditions for the Taliban: 1- Afghanistan will not be an incubator for terrorist groups, or a base for the export of terrorist activities or extremists to neighboring countries; 2- comply with human rights obligations, especially the rights of women, the rule of law, and press/media freedom; 3- to form an inclusive, consensual, transitional government representing all Afghan groups, including former politicians; 4- humanitarian access for the Afghan people in line with the EU's protocols, and a gradual increase in humanitarian aid over the coming phase; 5- the Taliban must honor its pledge to let foreigners and Afghans leave Afghanistan unhindered.

■ The recognition of the Taliban: The British prime minister asserted, and sent a direct message to some countries concerned with the Afghan file including Pakistan, that recognition of the Taliban government should happen on an international, nota unilateral basis.⁽²³⁾

■ The file of terrorist threats: Europe fears that the return of the Taliban, and the US withdrawal, which it described as "chaotic," will create a suitable environment for terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and others, thus helping them to find a foothold in Afghanistan once again, which will threaten European security.

■ The migration file: Europe is concerned that the difficult political and economic situation in Afghanistan will lead to new waves of migration from the country towards Europe, like what happened during the Syrian crisis. This would place a huge economic and social burden on European countries. Therefore, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs in Afghanistan Eva Johansson stressed the need to prevent irregular migration towards the borders of the EU. As a result of this fear, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that "the mistakes of the past must not be repeated." This refers to the 2015 refugee crisis in which nearly 1 million migrants fled to Europe within a year, leading to the growth of populist movements inside Europe, and causing a rift within the European bloc that has been unable to adopt or develop a fair control plan for migration. This explains the European move to cooperate with the countries neighboring Afghanistan that host refugees, so that the refugees remain there, including Iran.

■ Possible military intervention: With the idea to establish a European military force for rapid reaction gaining more traction, thus reducing Europe's dependence on Washington and safeguarding it against its sudden policy changes. During the last meeting in Slovenia on September 3, 2021, EU defense ministers presented a proposal to establish a rapid response force consisting of 5,000 soldiers from the 27 EU member countries to revise Europe's defense strategy and deal with international crises, after some criticized Europe's recent position on the unilateral American decision to stop securing Kabul Airport at the end of last August, forcing European countries to stop their evacuation process. This force, however, will not be an alternative to NATO, as emphasized by Germany and other European countries.

4.3. Chinese Interests and Concerns

Although China welcomed the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in principle, it criticized what it called a "sudden withdrawal," according to Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying. China is the closest ally of Pakistan, which has a strong relationship with the Taliban.

■ Potential risks to China's interests in Afghanistan: With the US withdrawal, Chinese companies are well positioned to exploit the mining potential in Afghanistan, including rare metals used to manufacture microchips and other cutting-edge technologies. The Chinese newspaper on international affairs *Global Times* reported on August 24, 2021, that Chinese companies are still scrutinizing the political and security risks in the country. In addition, China's ability to operate in Afghanistan will depend on whether the Taliban government faces Western sanctions or not, the newspaper said. Beijing is concerned about instability in Central Asia after the US withdrawal, and how this will impact its strategic project, the Belt and Road Initiative launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, through which many countries, most notably the Central Asian countries where Afghanistan lies at the heart, pass through.

■ The direction for further engagement: From a strategic perspective, the Chinese government has strong reasons to be more involved in Afghanistan. The country is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which includes trade and infrastructure projects in both Iran and Pakistan. Beijing is also concerned about the possibility of Afghanistan being used as a terrorist safe haven in the region, particularly for terrorists operating from Xinjiang in western China.

■ China betting on the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): According to China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, China is betting on its partners in the SCO to maintain its interests in the region, and to strengthen the China-Pakistan strategic dialogue to promote peace in Afghanistan.

■ Opportunities and challenges: China is trying to exploit the US withdrawal from Afghanistan to boost its presence in the Afghan arena, strengthen its economic influence and develop its political dimensions, and perhaps build

a long-term strategic partnership with the Afghan government led by the Taliban. However, there are many conditions and challenges facing China's aims, namely the Taliban's position on the Muslim minority Uyghurs in China. Beijing wants to completely neutralize the Taliban on this issue. Thus it was noticed that only two weeks before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, and in a "preemptive" step from Beijing, China received a Taliban delegation, and one day after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, it declared its readiness to deepen the already friendly and cooperative relations with the movement. The Chinese embassy is still working in Afghanistan, although the United States and most European countries have shifted their diplomatic missions to Qatar, and the Chinese media was keen to positively address the possible opportunities for cooperation between China and the Taliban. It highlighted the projects that can be exploited in Afghanistan, such as the exploitation of minerals, oil and deposits of lithium, and the possibility of Kabul joining the Belt and Road Initiative. China is seeking to integrate Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor under the Belt and Road Initiative. China has always wanted to make huge investments in Afghanistan given that it has the world's largest untapped reserves of copper, coal, iron, natural gas, cobalt, mercury, gold, lithium and thorium, with a total value of more than \$1 trillion.⁽²⁴⁾

4.4 Russian Interests

Russia is one of the most important international powers concerned with the developments in Afghanistan, due to its historical ties with the country and its past experience there, and the country's geostrategic importance for Moscow. Therefore, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is a source of great concern and a big inconvenience to the Russians, who believe that part of the strategic dimension of this US step is to export the Afghan problem to Russia and Afghanistan's neighboring countries.⁽²⁵⁾ Russian interests can be summarized as follows:

- Expansion of the partnership framework with China, Pakistan, and the United States: The Russian strategy also includes international efforts, such as the "extended troika:" China, Pakistan, and the United States.⁽²⁶⁾
- Triangular cooperation with China and Iran: Russia is well aware that there are new actors in the Afghan arena that it can coordinate with to achieve stability in Afghanistan. From the recent Russian efforts, it is clear that it has moved towards cooperation with both China and Iran.
- Staying alert: Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Moscow has increased the activity of its military base in Tajikistan and its forces in Kyrgyzstan. Russia's core interest within Afghanistan lies in preventing the destabilization of the region, but Moscow sees no problem in dealing with the Taliban government.

■ **Dual containment:** Moscow will continue its “dual policy” in Afghanistan. It seeks to communicate with the Taliban to ensure its political security. There is an increase in the number of Russian forces in Tajikistan, and intensive military cooperation with Tajikistan and Afghanistan to prevent extremists from coming to these countries via Afghan territory. On a wider scale, the US withdrawal from Central Asia reduces Washington’s influence in a region Russia considers as its sphere of influence.⁽²⁷⁾

5. Opportunities and Limits of Iran’s Movement in the Afghan Arena

5.1 Opportunities for Iran

As discussed in the previous sections of this paper, Iran faces a complex regional and international environment in Afghanistan, which poses a great challenge to it in preserving its interests in the country. However, Iran still has opportunities that it can exploit to protect and further its interests in Afghanistan. Accordingly, it is possible to draw a map of the possible intersections of Iranian interests:

■ **Cooperation with Pakistan:** Iran places relations with Pakistan at an important rank because it views Islamabad as part of its vision to achieve security in Afghanistan and the region. Tehran wants to keep its relations with Islamabad separate from the developments taking place in Afghanistan and it wants to change the policies of the powers present in Afghanistan, especially as the United States keeps on changing its policy towards the region, which varies according to different administrations. It seems that the Pakistani-Iranian-Afghan troika will have the upper hand in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, due to geography and historical and ethnic ties.

■ **Iran’s concern about the growing Turkish role:** Tehran realizes that the new Turkish role in Afghanistan will lead to a struggle for control and influence with Ankara. Turkey’s role has also created great challenges for Iran in the context of its relationship with the Taliban and perhaps to some degree with Pakistan. Some media outlets in Iran, Pakistan and Russia have expressed concern about the Turkish role. They launched campaigns against Ankara and talked about the transfer of Syrian mercenaries from Libya and northern Syria to Afghanistan and stressed on the need to observe Turkey closely to gauge any changes in the regional balance of power equation. Although Iran has not commented on Turkey’s steps in Afghanistan so far, this does not mean that it welcomes them, because it views with concern the presence of Turkey on its easternside.⁽²⁸⁾

■ **Refugee issues and the rise of extremism,:** Most of the regional and international powers concerned with the Afghan file share similar concerns with Iran about the developments in Afghanistan. Conflict and its escalation will impact the interests of all regional and international powers.

■ The problem of recognizing the new Afghan government: The recognition of the Taliban will be a point of contention between Iran and the countries concerned with this file. Russia, for example, links its acceptance of the Taliban to Afghanistan's neighboring countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan recognizing the new government. While Uzbekistan has expressed some warmth towards the Taliban, neighboring Tajikistan previously announced that it would not recognize the Taliban government dominated by Pashtuns, unless it was inclusive of other Afghan ethnic groups, with Tajiks representing about a quarter of these groups. Europe confirmed that recognition of the Taliban should not be individual, but rather multilateral, to ensure the Taliban's commitment to its obligations before the international community.

■ Iran's role in manipulating the balance of regional players to allow it to build strong relations with the Taliban: It is expected that Iran will play an important role in tipping the balance of the alliances that Afghanistan is likely to see in the foreseeable future. Undoubtedly, Afghanistan joining the China-Pakistan axis will be a great opportunity to expand the size of Chinese influence in the country, and in the South Asian region generally. It will also ensure a good relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, away from the Indian sphere of influence. These fears may prompt India to establish a relationship with the new Afghan government, as Afghanistan is of vital importance in India's foreign policy strategy. India relies on a number of political, economic and security tools in its foreign policy towards Kabul.⁽²⁹⁾

■ Russian-Chinese-Pakistani-Iranian consensus: These four countries agreed on an outline to deal with the current situation in Afghanistan, especially regarding the reconstruction of Afghanistan by the United States and NATO, in order to prevent a humanitarian crisis and economic collapse. They are in agreement on the need to form an "inclusive political structure" that represents all ethnic groups, and to prevent the use of Afghan territories by extremist movements.⁽³⁰⁾

5.2 The Limits of Iran's Movements in Afghanistan

Amid heated regional competition for influence and taking into account all the aforementioned regional and international intersections, Tehran aspires to play a role in the future of Afghanistan motivated by security and economic reasons. The prospects for Iran's role can be summarized in the following points:

■ Limited coordination: Joint coordination with the Taliban will be the most prominent option in the near term to ensure border security and the resumption of commercial traffic between the two sides to go back to normal, which used to bring Iran \$5 million per day. This coordination will probably help Afghanistan achieve a level of security and economic stability – given Russia's support for the release of Afghanistan's cash reserves held in US

banks. This is supported by the resumption of fuel exports to Afghanistan at the request of the Taliban on August 23, 2021. There are a number of official Iranian statements, including one by the Foreign Ministry spokesman on June 28 regarding the Taliban. He said that the Taliban does not represent all Afghans, but rather is part of the solution. The Iranian president recently announced that he rejected any attempt to impose foreign guardianship on Afghanistan and called for the formation of an inclusive government for all ethnicities.

■ **Cautious engagement:** This involves playing a role in the unfolding Afghan political scene by communicating with various political forces and national minorities to balance the influence of the Taliban, and offering to provide security and logistical help. Iran also contacted the leaders of the Hazara community and offered support in the face of potential threats. It avoids igniting an escalation with the movement, which provided guarantees to the international community regarding minority rights, it allowed Ashura celebrations to proceed and pledged to protect Shiite Husseiniyas in Afghanistan.

■ **Contributing to reconstruction:** A significant contribution to regional economic cooperation is one of Tehran's most important long-term aims in light of Afghanistan's great potential and strategic location along the Silk Road and the North-South axis.

Conclusion

Iran had exerted considerable efforts during the past years to adapt to the changes in Afghanistan's reality under US occupation which led to the emergence of new dynamics and different patterns of regional and international interactions. However, the Afghan reality today, following the withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces, has become more complex and intertwined than before. This new reality post-US withdrawal poses many challenges to Iran, including civil war returning, the worst scenario for Iran. New competitors have also entered the Afghan arena, most notably Turkey which is trying to expand its influence in Central Asia, and the countries neighboring Iran, including Azerbaijan. Therefore, Iran is facing a complex strategic environment in the post-US withdrawal period. This requires Iran to balance some of regional parties such as India, Pakistan and China and evaluate how to benefit from the margin of competition between Russia and the United States on the one hand and with other European countries on the other.

The paper concludes that the strategic game in Afghanistan and Central Asia has already begun and is expected to continue in the foreseeable future, according to various scenarios. As a result, Iran will remain in the circle of regional and international pressure, waiting for chances to move and build regional and international understandings.

Endnotes

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- (6) * Since 2001, Iran has become Afghanistan's largest trading partner, with a trade balance strongly tilted in its favor. The volume of trade exchange between the two countries in March 2017 to February 2018 amounted to nearly \$2 billion and increased in 2020-2021 by 25 percent. Iranian exports constituted 90 percent of total bilateral trade. This did not include illicit trade, which was estimated at \$1 billion for 2016-2017 alone. See Raza Nader et al., "Iranian Influence in Afghanistan."
- (7) * Afghanistan is located to the east of Iran, and the shared border extends to 978 kilometers. Iran is one of the important seaports for Afghanistan, and the latter is a direct passage for Iran to Central Asia and China. The number of Afghans is 23 million people, distributed over more than 300 tribes. They make up four main ethnicities: the Pashtuns with 40 percent, the Tajiks with 30 percent, the Uzbeks with 10 percent, the Hazaras with less than 8 percent. The majority are Sunnis, and Hanafi. The Shiites account for about 5 percent with a smaller percentage of Ismaili Shiites, and the Persian language is spoken by 60 percent of the population used by the Tajiks. See Nader, Iranian influence in Afghanistan."
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