

## Original Article

# Geopolitical Dimensions of the Iran-Afghanistan Crisis: U.S. Role and Regional Implications

Dawar Khan Kundi<sup>1\*</sup>,  Abdul Rahim<sup>1</sup> & Dr. Munawar Hussain<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD American Studies Scholar at Quaid e Azam University, Islamabad

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor of American Studies at Quaid e Azam University, Islamabad

## Abstract

This research papers focuses on multidimensional geopolitical conflict between the Iran-Afghanistan which has its roots in historical grievances, security issues, strategic mistrust, and role of external factors for hegemonic designs. Despite the facts that both states share long cultural and historical ties, interference in each other's affairs, and cycle of suspension backed by supporting destabilizing forces have left significant implications and consequences. Resultantly, the entire region has been turned into a war-theatre and proxy zone for Great Power rivalries. The 1979 Islamic Revolution and the USSR invasion of Afghanistan further intensified the state of affairs and security environment. The U.S's involvement in the Afghan jihad, concerns over Iran's nuclear proliferation, and Tehran's regional ambitions added more fuel to the geopolitical and geostrategic tensions. The post 9/11 scenarios and Taliban's resurgence following U.S withdrawal introduced more complexities highlighting vibrant shift in geopolitical chessboard. Applying Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as theoretical framework, the study explores the geopolitical dimensions of the two immediate neighboring states, the nature of conflicts, and role of the U.S. in shaping security dynamics in Central and South Asia. It is crucial to understand these dynamics in order to assess evolving power competition and regional stability in a changing geostrategic significant era.

**Keywords:** Iran, Afghanistan, Taliban, U.S., Regional Security

## INTRODUCTION

Having important geostrategic and geo-political location, Iran and Afghanistan have always been seen as important regional players in structuring the political, historical, administrative, cultural and social hemispheres of South and Central Asia as well as the Middle East. The strategic, security and larger economic interests of the regional and extra-regional powers further galvanized the strategic and geographical significance of Iran and Afghanistan. Historically, both the states have always been involved in competition with each other for regional influence, territorial control, economic interests, political gains, and power. Quest for power and regional monopoly in Central Asia brought the two rivals to Indian Subcontinent

for hegemony.

The extra regional players including Russia, Britain, and the US have always helped to fuel the fire of competition and hostility between Iran and Afghanistan. Much has been done by aforementioned great powers to widen the gap of differences and enmity between the two immediate neighboring states. The continued state of crisis, and perpetuation led the two states to pay no particular attention on borders, trade partnership, mutual understanding over water resources, cooperation to counter drug smuggling and trafficking, structural development, and political stability (Bareach, 2008). Resultantly, dark clouds of fluctuated relations have always prevailed over the political and social hemisphere of Iran and Afghanistan.



**Copyright** © The Author(s). 2025

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribute 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.



### How to cite:

Kundi, D. K., Rahim, A., & Hussain, M. (2025). Geopolitical Dimensions of the Iran-Afghanistan Crisis: U.S. Role and Regional Implications. *Siazga Research Journal*, 4(1), 14–23.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15413009>

Disputes and conflicts over territories, language, resources, culture, and ethnicity were the dominant characteristics of their relations with each other. Since 1701, the two immediate states are in a permanent state of conflicts and misunderstandings which has led the both states to hostility, mistrust, and antagonism. Despite the conflicts, Iran, as compared to Afghanistan, has emerged as socio-economically stable country with strong central government, strong institutions, and functional state structure. That's why; Iran tactically continues to pursue its long-term security, economic, political and strategic interests in war-turned Afghanistan (2008).

Iran perceives Afghanistan as a source of threat to its multi-fold regional security and strategic interests. Since, the Soviet Union's invasion and the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has been playing a proxy war in Afghanistan through non-Pashtun proxies to cement economic, strategic and security interests. Iran while supporting Shia community in Northern Afghanistan is the principal factor behind Afghan grievances and conflict turning it into ethnic and sectarian clash. Tehran, since the Afghan Jihad, has been sponsoring and backing Sunni non-Pashtuns and Shia Hazaras against the conglomerate of Sunni Taliban with Pashtun majority.

Historically, Iran intends to control the Province of Herat in North for strategic and security designs. In 1995, when the Taliban entered the Herat city and took its control, they immediately cut-off the bordering routes used to connect Afghanistan with Iran. Islamabad was also blamed by Tehran for providing tactical and innovative mobile warfare to capture strategically important city of Herat. In 1996, the Taliban gained control over the Kabul city, Ahmad Shah Massoud was forced to leave Kabul. To counter Taliban, Iran as well as Russia extended military and financial support to Massoud to continue the war for control over Kabul city (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

To counter Northern Alliance, and extend territorial control to the northern Afghanistan, the Taliban continued to attack anti-Taliban conglomerates backed by Iran. Shaberghan- the capital city of Jawzjan as the headquarters, Rasheed Dostum has established a mini-state of five provinces including Mazara-i-Sharif. Abdul Malik Palawan- the key commander of Dostum signed an agreement with the Taliban, helped to capture around 5000 men of Dostum. When the Taliban marched towards Mazara Sharif in 1998, Abdul Malik went against the Taliban. With the

help of local Hazara, hundreds of Taliban fighters were killed, and more than 3000 were arrested, and executed summarily. In August, the Taliban re-captured Mazara Sharif, and more than 2500 Hazaras along with 8 Iranian diplomats were put to death. Malik Palawan went into exile in Iran. The situation significantly created a war-like scenario between the Afghan Taliban and Iran. More explicitly, Taliban's coming into power was observed as a threat to Tehran's interests.

The post 9/11 incident brought Iran to a complex position to determine its regional influence and long-term security interests. The military intervention of the US in Afghanistan and dismantling Taliban's regime became a source of double consciousness for Tehran's interests. On one hand, Iran was happy to see the Taliban defeated, but on the other hand, military presence of the United States and its allies in immediate neighbor was also alarming. Following U.S.'s presence, Tehran significantly attempted to build understanding with Washington, and supported Karzai's government financially to normalize ties, but Tehran's intended interests were sabotaged by the Bush administration.

Consequently, Iran re-approached the Taliban leadership, and backed the group against the US and allied forces. After the resurgence of the Taliban after the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, Iran, once again perceived the Taliban as threat to its strategic, economic and security interests. Currently, with the help of China, Afghan Taliban and Iran are engaged in diplomatic ties to make understanding over existing issues faced by the two immediate neighbors.

### **Role of the US before 9/11**

Among the several inter-twined and long-term common interests of Iran and the US, Afghanistan has always been considered as the most significant to establish ground for interests, and counter each other's long-term security and strategic designs. From Coup against Muhammad Mossadegh in 1953 backed by CIA and MI6 to 1979's revolution and Soviet invasion, both the U.S. and Iran have been seen either supporting or countering each other strictly limited to their regional security goals. Interestingly, the continued hostility between Tehran and Washington also helped Pakistan and the Taliban to strengthen their respective interests in Afghanistan (Rubin & Batmanglich, 2008).

Moreover, from 1<sup>st</sup> phase of Cold War till 1978's civil war, Afghanistan remained a non-

aligned state in the region whose soviet-trained army squeezed between the interests of the former USSR and the US and its allies. In the early 1970s, President Nixon (under Nixon Doctrine) extended support to the ruling Shah of Iran to back Muhammad Daud in order to minimize his dependence on Moscow. The Shah of Iran supplied Sardar Daud with oil-wealth to bring him close to the US. The changing regional political scenarios shifted the entire theatre of power politics to new dimensions. Muhammad Daud and Shah of Iran were overthrown by political rivals in 1978 and 1979 respectively. As security and strategic scenarios were changing rapidly, the US moved to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for its regional interests. The US's partnership with Pakistan and Saudi helped Washington to ensure its influence in Persian Gulf, and wage proxy war against the USSR in Afghanistan. In these scenarios, Iran was clearly isolated (2008).

The emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini's, successful Iranian revolution, and the 4<sup>th</sup> 1979 US hostage crisis in which more than 50 staff officers of US Embassy in Tehran were captivated by vibrant students and supporters of Khomeini further made the ties vibrant. These diplomats were imprisoned for more than 444 days. Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 proclamation against Sulman Rushdie and pronouncing death penalty for authoring satanic verses, and Iran's desire to become nuclear power significantly isolated Iran politically and economically at global level particularly from the Western world.

In 1989, USSR's withdrawal and Mujahedeen's emergence in Afghanistan added more worries to Iran's security and strategic interests. The situation further cemented Iran's concern of Afghanistan as strong sanctuary of anti-Shia militants. Though Iran attempted to draw a line of hatred between the Sunni and Shia Afghans by supporting Hazara community, but the active role of the US in Afghanistan undermined it to a great extent. The Taliban's coming into power was observed by Tehran as government of Pashtun community which was perceived a clear threat to Shia community. During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Iran actively supported non-Pashtuns which also became a source of tension between Tehran and Washington (Worden, 2018). In 1997, when Muhammad Khatami became the President of Iran, he masterly played a wise and diplomatic role to ease tension between Iran and the US as well as the West. His continued efforts significantly helped Iran to somehow normalize ties with the western world. The tragic incident

of September 2001 gave hope to Iranian security strategists to come close to the U.S. and West to ensure peace, maintain security, and rebuild Afghanistan. In this regards, Tehran played role to implement the UN peace plan in Afghanistan.

### **U.S-Iran ties in Post-9/11**

The 9/11 attacks colossally marked a remarkable change in United States' approach towards the Eastern world and Islamic world in particular. The War on Terror policy became the driving force behind U.S's military interventions and regional strategic realignments in South and Central Asia. Under Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), U.S.'s invasion of Afghanistan was the key to War on Terror to dismantle Taliban regime and eliminate Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2008). The U.S. invasion not only altered Afghanistan's political theatre, but also shifted regional security dynamics. Iran shouldn't be the exception in this context. Washington-Tehran's cooperation in earlier days went to a gigantic change which is still prevalent (Jones, 2009). The vibrant securitization of Iran's regional influence led the United States to further expand regional military bases aiming to contain Tehran leading to strained relations (Mearsheimer, 2014). From geopolitical perspective, Iran viewed U.S's presence as threat to its regional influence (Nasr, 2006). The U.S aimed to strengthen its influence through military presence, while Iran pursued parallel policy by engaging different Afghan factions to balance impacts of U.S's presence in Afghanistan (Rubin, 2013). Tehran gave leverage to its soft policy through economic support to strengthen foothold in Afghanistan (Maloney, 2008).

In the earlier stages of U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Iranian authorities provided not only logistic support, but also extended strategic and counter-intelligence support for military operations against the Taliban. Tehran exercised its convincing role in establishing interim government in Kabul, and boot out the Taliban from power (Dobbins, 2008).

Along with supporting the US presence, and removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, Iran tactically focused on re-organizing the forces of northern alliance that were non-Pashtuns in majority. President Khatami administration primarily focused on the US presence as an opportunity to normalize ties with the US, and extend cooperation on the issue of Afghanistan. Though the US-Iran mutual cooperation to rebuild Afghanistan, strengthen the counter-



terrorism operation ended due to mistrust, and authoritative behaviour of Bush administration, but if it has succeeded, it would have left detrimental impacts on Pakistan's regional position whose powerful military enjoyed strong position, and enjoyed monopoly during US-Pakistan cooperation on War on Terror. The emergence of mistrust between Tehran and Washington helped Islamabad to strengthen its regional security and political interests (Rubin & Batmanglich, 2008). Evidently, Iran even offered the US and the NATO forces to work under their command in infrastructure development, and strengthening the newly established representative government in Afghanistan (2008).

Instead of bringing Tehran close on Afghanistan issue, the Bush administration categorically rejected the proposal, and blamed the Iranian government for providing safe havens to the Afghan Mujahedeen especially Gulbadeen Hikmatyar who was once supported by the US against the former USSR during Afghan war of 1980s. Tehran expelled him, but it didn't help to appease the US (BBC News, 2002). Additionally, the Bush administration and intelligence officials also blamed Iran for building ground for strategic and security influence in Heart, which was somehow similar to accusing the U.S. for extending control over the Northern Mexico (Schmitt, 2002). The U.S. also charged the Iranian government for harboring the key leaders of Al-Qaida, and providing safe sanctuary to blacklisted terrorists (O'Toole, 2002). In such scenarios, Iran was left with the only option to re-build ties with the Taliban in order to counter the US presence in Afghanistan. Interestingly, Iran faced a state of doubled-edged sword; it was unwilling to see the Taliban to win, and also didn't want the long but secure presence of the US in Afghanistan.

The most troubling and serious security concern of the Iran government was the U.S.'s presence in Afghanistan as well as on Western and Eastern borders in Iraq. The military presence of the U.S. in any form was considered a serious threat that may sabotage Iran's national interests. The Iranian military strategists were not only concerned with the ultimate U.S. withdrawal from these states, but, rather, were more worried about the post-US withdrawal scenarios, and expected crisis in Iraq and Afghanistan which will surely pose a vibrant threat to Iran's socio-economic and security (Toscano, 2012).

As far Iran's interests in Afghanistan, Tehran has never accepted the Taliban regime or their

presence in any form, but always considered as furious force compatible to its national and regional interests. The post 9/11 invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, consequently dethroning Afghan Taliban and Saddam Hussain respectively diverted two significant security threats to Iran's interests, and helped Tehran to further enhance its role and interests in the regional power politics. Iran played on the both sides of the crease; supported the Karzai's government for infrastructural development, and also provided the Taliban with military and financial assistance to keep the insurgency active in order to make the US feel insecure. Such ambiguity can be interpreted as an opportunistic attempt to hedge its bets, but there is more to it than that. Iran wanted to destabilize the presence of the US and allied forces, but also didn't want to weaken the Karzai's government in order to avert the threat of the Taliban's resurgence. Iran was in favour of the US withdrawal, but not in a sense to leave Afghanistan in a state of chaos and anarchy which would pave way for re-Talibanization of Afghanistan (2012).

Following 9/11 incident, President George W. Bush's address on January 29, 2002 by introducing new term "Axis of Evil" referring to North Korea, Iraq and Iran was the defining speech that deteriorated understanding between Washington and Tehran, stating that these three states are the actual threats to global peace and security. Undoubtedly, American diplomats' inability to engage Iran in re-building the state infrastructure of Afghanistan in post-Taliban period was also the key factor behind Iran's inclusion in 'Axis of Evil' (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

Iran's nuclear program to become atomic power was also the key factor behind fragility in ties and rising hostility between the two states. Tehran was intending to expend nuclear activity for its long-term national security, strategic and economic interests, but Washington and NATO countries were unwilling to allow Tehran at any cost which may help to enlarge its nuclear activities, stating that Iranian nuclear proliferation program would threaten security and sovereignty of neighboring states in the region. Consequently, the US government backed by its Western allies imposed multiple economic and political sanctions on Iran to end nuclear proliferation program. The deteriorated human rights situation since June 2009, and allegation of Iranian plotting to assassinate Saudi Arabian Diplomat in Washington, DC added further fuel to

mistrust and rivalry between the two states. The American Congress even suggested outlawing any diplomat activity with Iran (Laipson, 2012).

In 2013, when Hassan Rouhani became the 7<sup>th</sup> President of Iran, focus on normalizing ties with the US, and lobbying to end sanctions, and move forward for regional economic and security was significantly prioritized. Undoubtedly, a reasonable shift in US's anti-Iran rhetoric at official level was seen. For Iranian authorities too, conflict and poking the US in Afghanistan was considered irresponsible and unfavorable, rather, focus was given to validate Tehran's interests in Afghanistan.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Regional Security Complex Theory- the RSCT proposed Barry Buzan is applied as a framework to critically analyze the regional security dynamics to focus on interdependence of states within a region and how their security concerns are shaped by their relationships with each other. According to the RSCT of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver that, the national securities of those immediate states can never be alienated from each other realistically whose primary security concerns are closely linked together (Buzan, 2007). The security concerns of these states cannot be analyzed separately from each other until their securitization and de-securitization operations are strongly inter-twined (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Buzan argues that security concerns and projected implications, and their resolutions are analyzed on four levels. Domestic level of analysis focuses on Political instability and structural violence. In Afghanistan as well Iran, mainstream politics is divided on the basis of sectarian and ethnic grounds, resultantly, given birth to internal conflicts, inequality, sectarian violence, deprivation of minorities, and vibrant suppression of women representation and human rights violations. At regional level, Afghanistan and Iran have always been seen in state of conflicts; both at lower and higher intensities in form of cross border clashes, accusations of supporting militant elements against each other, and about all interferences in internal affairs which is mostly practiced by Tehran against Kabul. At inter-regional level, the state of conflicts and crisis between the two immediate states must be taken in context of security complex among Central-South Asia and the Middle East following their perceived impacts, opportunities and role to be played at

inter-regional level for security, cooperation, bilateral and multilateral agreements and trade partnership. The global level of analysis focuses on interests and competition among great powers, and their impacts.

Focusing constructivist and conflict resolution perspective of the RSCT, the study aims to analyse factors behind Iran-Afghanistan interlinked security concerns and conceptualize stable security and sustainable cooperation for a long-run in the region. Applying this theory to the Iran-Afghanistan conflict, we can see how the security concerns of these two countries are influenced by their regional context. Iran and Afghanistan are both part of South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East where their security concerns are colossally shaped by the complex web of relationships among these regional states. Amongst, Iran is a major regional power having history of interfering on sectarian grounds in internal politics of neighbours. Afghanistan, on the other hand, has been a more isolated and war-turned state with fragile federal and multifold territorial and security issues with neighboring states.

The conflict between Iran and Afghanistan has been shaped by a number of factors, including historical tensions, ethnic and religious differences, and geopolitical considerations. Iran has long been concerned about the security of its eastern borders, and has sought to exert influence in Afghanistan through a variety of means, including support for various factions in the country's civil war. This has led to a complex web of alliances and rivalries, with Iran and Pakistan both supporting different factions in the Afghan conflict.

Overall, the nature of conflicts between Iran and Afghanistan conflict can easily be understood in context of inter-linked security dynamics that arise within a regional security complex. Both countries are influenced by the actions of their neighbors and are subject to the power struggles that play out within the region. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective strategies for managing conflicts and promoting regional stability.

### **Factors behind Crisis**

In the post US withdrawal and Taliban's coming to power, engaging the Taliban government on existing issues remains important for Ebrahim Raisi's administration. Iran's any sort of relation with the Taliban regime has direct implications on its national and regional economic and

security interests. Asphyxiated by the US sanctions, Iranian economy is strained and facing multidimensional challenges following the surge of COVID19, the resurgence of the Taliban Afghan refugees' influx, scarcity of water resources, insecurity at border with Afghanistan, and rising threat of Khurasan Chapter of the ISIS-frequently referred as the ISKP.

Despite the challenges and existing security concerns, Iran and Afghanistan are facing a number of key issues including water dispute, border security, drug smuggling and trafficking, ethnic and sectarian conflict, cross-border militancy, and Iran's interference in Afghanistan's internal political hemisphere. The escalation of these prevailing issues has put serious impacts on trade-partnership and mutual cooperation between the two immediate states. According to Iranian business authorities, Afghanistan covers 11 percent of its non-oil imports including food items and fruits from Iran which is significantly favourable for Iran's national economy. In recent perpetuated and untoward situation, the trade and business activities have fallen to a detrimental level which will impact the interests of the both states.

### Border Issue

Having 572 miles long border, the two immediate states Iran and Afghanistan share a long border of 572 miles starting from tri-junction of Kushaka (Torghondi) with Turkmenistan in the Northwest to the tri-junction of Koh-e-Malik Siyah in the south with Pakistan. In the north, Islam Qala, Abu Nasr Farahi in Centre, and Zaranj in South are the crossing points between Iran and Afghanistan. Following cross-border clashes, on 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 2022, Taliban border force and Iranian border security personnel engaged in furious conflict at Iran-Afghanistan bordering area resulting into a single casualty on Taliban side. Iranian authorities blamed Afghan Taliban for violating territorial jurisdiction and hoisting flag inside Iranian territory (Yawar, 2022). The clash, a vivid example of routine-wise gun-battles, actually represents the nature of tension that exists between the two neighbours impacting all dimensions of affairs.

In August 2022, a high level of delegation led by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Kabul aiming to negotiate and resolve cross-border challenges, and strengthen cooperation on border issues particularly security concerns (Eqbal, 2022). In border trade, goods including food products, cement, iron materials and petroleum items are mostly imported from

Iranian side, and vegetables, fruits as well as drugs smuggling is done on Afghanistan's side (Farr, 2022). The presence of militant groups along the Iran-Afghanistan border has also been a major source of tension. The Taliban, in particular, has been active in border areas, and this has raised concerns for both countries. Iran accuses the Taliban of harboring and supporting anti-Iranian militant groups, which it claims have carried out attacks on Iranian soil.

### Water Disputes

The division of Helmand River's water- the major source of irrigation in Southeastern Iran- is one of the main issue that exists between the two countries. As a tributary, Helmand River starts from Sanglakh- the range of Koh Hindu Kush in Northeast of Afghanistan, stretched along with Lashkargah in Southwestern Afghanistan, enriches Hamun Lake in the south, and finally flows toward Sistan region of Iran. The Helmand River carries vital importance for agriculture and Hydropower sectors in Sistan region and Helmand province of Iran and Afghanistan respectively. The farmers of these areas are heavily dependent on Helmand's water. To overcome domestic needs, Afghanistan has significantly focused on constructing dams to ensure the demands of electricity and irrigation (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2016). Consequently, Iran faced alarming situation of water-shortage in its Southeastern region. It would not be wrong if we term the Helmand water issue as the bone of contention between the two neighbours. The construction of Kamal Khan Dam further escalated the existing tension between Iran and Afghanistan (AREU, 2016).

Afghanistan and Iran have also signed Helmand Water Treaty on March 13, 1973 to ensure just distribution of Helmand water. Iran was granted with the right of getting 22 cubic meters per second with extra right of 4 cubic feet of water from Helmand River. Later on, contrary to the agreement, Iranian authorities demanded more rights of water. Afghanistan rejected any such demand of Iran, and focused on constructing more dams. In August 2022, Mujeeb Rehman Omar- the deputy minister of water and energy of Afghanistan categorically stated that we will not grant additional water to Iran at any cost referring to Helmand water accord of 1973 (Von Hein, 2021).

### Refugees Crisis

Following the return of the Taliban, the mass migration of Afghans refugees toward Iran further



escalated the tension and crisis between the two states. More than 3 million Afghan refugees were estimated to be present in Iran. Amongst, 0.78 million refugees were registered legally, and around 0.586 million were allowed to enter Iran via visas and passports (Rich, 2022). The figure of unregistered refugees is unknown which Iran perceives as security risk. Though, Afghan refugees from Tajik and Hazara backgrounds, claiming persecution by the Taliban mostly travel to and facilitated by Iran, but the number of Pashtun refugees is also significant. Majority of the refugees are placed around big cities, and allowed to work in lower-state of income (Sawhney & Azad, 2020). In fact, Iran's approach to those refugees with Persian speaking ground has always seen soft and cooperative as compared to other ethnicities particularly Pashtuns.

### Drug Smuggling

Drug smuggling is the most serious issue that has challenged Iranian border security guards. The frequent trafficking of drugs at Iran-Afghanistan border has always led to cross-firing incidents resulting into deaths of border security personnel and drug-smugglers. As per reports, 90% of opium is produced in Afghanistan in which more than 50% of the total drugs are smuggled to Iran in order to access markets in Middle East and Europe. More than 2 million young Iranians are vibrantly addicted to drugs. To counter this dilemma, Iran, with the help of the UNODC- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, has significantly worked to control supply of drugs (Laipson, 2012). Due to its location, Iran is considered a major player that has helped to tackle drug smuggling globally.

To counter smuggling and reduce supply of drugs, Iran has invested around \$1 billion to maximize security, and deployed more than 50 thousand personnel of Iranian Revolutionary Guards on its eastern borders. The reason behind these security measurements is to control smuggling, and the attacks of smugglers who are often equipped with heavy weapons in bordering areas. According to AFP report, Iran hanged around 179 and 65 smugglers in 2010 and 2011 respectively to tackle drug trafficking (2012).

### Sectarian Issue

The Taliban are fundamentally the followers of Deobandi Islam- a conservative version of Islamic fundamentalism. In 1866, the Deobandi brand of Islamic conservatism emerged in Darul Uloom Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, India. During

the rule of Safavid dynasty in Iran, Shia Islam placed its footprints between 1501 to 1736 CE in Afghanistan (Farr, 2022). Majority of the Hazara ethnicity represent Shia version of Islam in Afghanistan. Iran has always supported Shia sect in Afghanistan as being the leading Shia majority state in Muslim world.

In 1996, following the devastating factional fights among warlords like Ahmad Shah Massud, Gulbadeen Hikmatyar, Burhanuddin Rabbani, and Rasheed Dostum, the Taliban gained took control of 90% Afghanistan, and implemented strict principles of Sharia which also victimized and suppressed Shia community particularly Hazara in Afghanistan. From 1992 to 1998, more than 2000 Hazaras were killed amid the fights between Taliban and anti-Taliban warlords. A vibrant shift in Iran and Taliban was observed in August 1998 when the Taliban attacked Mazar-i-Sharif, and killed 9 Iranian diplomats along with tens of hundreds of Hazaras (Worden, 2018). After 9/11, the leading factor behind Iran's support to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was to overthrow Taliban regime whom Tehran considered as anti-Shia conglomerates of religious militants.

### Regional Implications

The recent border disputes between Iran and Afghanistan have far-reaching implications for the region as a whole, with specific consequences for Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. These implications encompass security concerns, geopolitical dynamics, economic ramifications, and refugee crises.

The border disputes have significant security implications for the entire region. The presence of militant groups and cross-border attacks pose threats to security of these three immediate neighbours. Iran has faced security challenges due to the alleged support and shelter provided by the Taliban to anti-Iranian militant groups. These disputes have led to occasional military operations and airstrikes by Iran on Afghan soil, which can further escalate tensions. Similarly, Pakistan has faced its own security challenges stemming from militant activities along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, with the potential for spillover effects into Iranian and Pakistani territories.

The border disputes also affect the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Iran and Afghanistan have historically had a complex relationship, influenced by various factors such as ethnic ties, religious affiliations, and regional power struggles. The disputes can impact the broader

regional dynamics, particularly in terms of the influence and role of external powers. The involvement of neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, in mediating the disputes can shape the power dynamics and alliances in the region.

The border disputes can have economic ramifications for the both states. Trade between Iran and Afghanistan may be disrupted due to heightened border tensions, leading to decreased economic cooperation and potential loss of revenue. Smuggling networks, which thrive in unstable border regions, can also hamper legitimate trade and economic activities.

The ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and refugee crisis have direct implications for Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Meanwhile, more than 2 million Afghans are living in Iran as refugees placing a significant burden on its resources and infrastructure. The recent border disputes and security concerns may lead to increased refugee flows into Iran, exacerbating the strain on its economy and social fabric. Afghanistan's internal conflicts and the resulting displacement also affect Pakistan, which has been accommodating Afghan refugees for an extended period, creating socioeconomic challenges and security risks.

The border disputes emphasize the importance of regional cooperation and coordination. It is imperative for Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to engage in sustained dialogue, share intelligence, and collaborate on border security measures. Regional organization particularly the SAARC and the ECO should ought to strengthen mechanisms to ensure and address the existing crisis and conflicts between the immediate neighboring states. Improved regional cooperation can enhance security, promote stability, and foster economic integration.

The recent border disputes between Iran and Afghanistan have wide-ranging implications for the region, particularly for Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. These implications encompass security challenges, shifting geopolitical dynamics, economic ramifications, and the strain of accommodating Afghan refugees. Addressing these disputes requires concerted efforts from all parties involved, including diplomatic engagement, regional cooperation, and proactive measures to combat militancy and illegal activities. By working towards peaceful resolutions and fostering stability, the region can mitigate the adverse consequences and move towards a more secure and prosperous future.

## **Towards Conflict Resolution**

Resolving the recent border disputes between Iran and Afghanistan requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying causes and concerns of both nations. By implementing effective solutions, these neighboring countries can work towards enhancing border security, reducing illegal activities, promoting regional stability, and fostering cooperative relations. This article explores some suggested solutions that could contribute to resolving the ongoing disputes along the Iran-Afghanistan border.

Promoting increased cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan in managing their shared border is crucial. This can be achieved through the establishment of joint border control mechanisms, intelligence sharing, and coordinated patrols. Regular meetings and consultations between the borders authorities of both countries can help address security concerns, exchange information on smuggling networks, and develop joint strategies to combat illicit activities effectively.

Engaging in sustained diplomatic dialogue at the bilateral and regional levels is vital for resolving the border disputes. Iran and Afghanistan should seek to strengthen diplomatic ties, increase high-level exchanges, and promote trust-building measures. Regular diplomatic dialogues backed by United Nations-the UN and other regional organizations must work to provide a platform for discussing and negotiating the outstanding issues, including water disputes, cross-border militant activity, and refugee management.

Addressing water-related disputes along the Iran-Afghanistan border requires a collaborative approach. Both nations should explore the possibility of establishing joint water management committees to ensure equitable distribution of water resources, particularly from rivers like the Helmand River. These committees can develop mechanisms for monitoring water usage, implementing water-saving technologies, and resolving disputes through mutual agreement rather than resorting to unilateral actions.

To effectively combat militant activity and smuggling, Iran and Afghanistan should enhance their cross-border security cooperation. This can involve joint military operations, intelligence sharing, and coordinated efforts to target militant groups and dismantle smuggling networks.



Exchange programs for security personnel and joint training exercises can facilitate knowledge-sharing and improve the operational capabilities of both countries' security forces.

As per the issue of Afghan refugees is concerned, there is urgent need of establishing comprehensive frameworks for managing and assisting refugees and their issues. This includes strengthening cooperation on refugee registration, protection, and voluntary repatriation programs. Additionally, organizations like the UNHCR can play role to support the process of dialogue, coordinating assistance efforts, and sharing best practices for refugee management. Promoting economic cooperation and development projects in border regions can contribute to reducing illegal activities and enhancing stability. Iran and Afghanistan can collaborate on initiatives such as trade facilitation, infrastructure development, and joint investment projects. By improving economic conditions in border areas, both countries can create opportunities for local communities, discourage illicit activities, and foster mutual interdependence.

## Conclusion

The history of Iran-Afghanistan relations is complex and has been shaped by political, economic, and cultural factors. The two countries share a long and porous border that has been a source of tension and conflict. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a significant shift in Iran-Afghanistan relations, with the rise of political instability affecting the two countries' ties. Though post-Taliban era was constructive in context of Iran-Afghanistan relations where Iran played a significant role in the country's reconstruction, but the two countries still face several challenges, including border disputes, ethnic tensions, and political differences. Sharing mutual borders, intertwined social, economic and political fabric, deep cultural and historical ties, Iran- Afghanistan must build an environment favourable for security and conflict resolution. The U.S's role is much significant in this regard which should not be ignored by Tehran and Kabul. Resolving the existing issues, Iran and Afghanistan should ensure support of the U.S. along with focusing on diplomatic, security, economic, and humanitarian dimensions.

## Competing Interests

The authors did not declare any competing interest.

## References

- Bareach, K. U. (2008). Iran-Afghan relations in historical perspective. Balochistan University Quetta.
- BBC News. (2002, February 28). Key events in the Iran-Iraq war.
- BBC.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/1842427.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1842427.stm)
- Buzan, B. (2007). People, states and fear: An agenda for international security studies in the post-Cold War era (2nd ed.). ECPR Press.
- Buzan, B., & Waever, O. (2003). Regions and powers: The structure of international security (Vol. 9). Cambridge University Press.
- Dobbins, J. (2008). After the Taliban: Nation-building in Afghanistan. Potomac Books.
- Encyclopædia Britannica. (n.d.). Axis of evil. Britannica.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/axis-of-evil>
- Eqbal, S. (2022, August 14). Surging border tensions; Iranian delegation arrives in Afghan capital to discuss border issues. The Khamma Press.  
<https://www.khaama.com/surging-border-tensions-iraniandelegation-arrives-in-afghan-capital-to-discuss-border-issues-457584/>
- Farr, G. (2022, August 23). Iran-Afghanistan: Growing tension after the return of the Taliban. E-International Relations.  
<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/08/23/iran-and-Afghanistan-growing-tensions-after-the-return-of-the-taliban/>
- Human Rights Watch. (2001). Backgrounder on Afghanistan: History of the war.
- Jones, S. G. (2009). In the graveyard of empires: America's war in Afghanistan. W.W. Norton.
- Laipson, E. (2012). Engaging Iran on Afghanistan. Stimson & N.
- Maloney, S. (2008). Iran's long reach: Iran as a pivotal state in the Muslim world. U.S. Institute of Peace.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). The tragedy of great power politics. W.W. Norton.

- Nasr, V. (2006). *The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future*. W.W. Norton.
- O'Toole. (2002, January 11). Iran defends role in Afghanistan. BBC News.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1754282.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1754282.stm)
- Rashid, A. (2008). *Descent into chaos: The U.S. and the failure of nation-building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*. Viking.
- Rich, S. (2022). Refugees in Iran. UNHCR Report.  
<https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/>
- Rubin, B. R. (2013). *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the war on terror*. Oxford University Press.
- Rubin, B. R., & Batmanglich, S. (2008). *The US and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy gone awry*. MIT Center for International Studies, 3.
- Sawhney, A., & Azad, S. (2020, June 1). No country for minorities: The inequality of state repression in Iran. Open Democracy.  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/no-country-minorities-inequality-state-repression-iran/>
- Schmitt, E. (2002, January 10). Iran exerts sway in Afghan region, worrying the U.S. The New York Times.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/10/world/nation-challenged-regional-politics-iran-exerts-sway-afghan-region-worrying-us.html>
- Thomas, V., Azizi, M., & Behzad, K. (2016). *Developing transboundary water resources: What perspectives for cooperation between Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan?* Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
- Toscano, R. (2012). *Iran's role in Afghanistan*. CIDOB Policy Research Project.
- Von Hein, S. (2021, September 9). Iran-Afghan water dispute to test Tehran's ties to Taliban. DW.  
<https://www.dw.com/en/iran-afghanistan-water-dispute-to-test-tehrans-ties-to-taliban/a-59112469>
- Worden, S. (2018). *Iran and Afghanistan's long, complicated history*. U.S. Institute of Peace.  
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/06/iran-and-afghanistans-long-complicated-history>
- Yawar, M. Y. (2022, July 31). One dead in clashes between Taliban, Iran border forces, Afghan official says. Reuters.  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/one-dead-clashes-between-taliban-iran-border-forces-afghan-police-official-2022-07-31/>