

Iran Struggles Unsuccessfully for Influence in Central Asia

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Brief Analysis

On the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran, Iranian officials will consult with Central Asian republics in another failed attempt to strengthen the Islamic Republic's position and counter what they see as dangerous U.S. influence in the region.

In recent months, Tehran's diplomatic efforts in Central Asia have far surpassed their traditional level. Iranian officials have met with representatives of the region's ex-Soviet republics on numerous occasions, including on the sidelines of the June 6 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, at several events organized by the Tehran-influenced Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), at bilateral trade commission meetings with Kazakhstan (June) and Turkmenistan (July 15), through exchanges of delegations, and in other multilateral and bilateral forums. Yet the actual impact of this flurry of activity is questionable.

FEARS OF GREATER U.S. INFLUENCE

A major reason for Tehran's intensified diplomacy in the region is Washington's planned military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Iran's ruling elites are practically unanimous in their belief that the announced departure is nothing but a cover for a strategic regrouping. According to this view, the United States may decide to not only remain in Afghanistan, but also increase its military presence in other Central Asian countries. Tehran's apprehensions became stronger in June-July, when Central Asian and Russian media sources began spreading rumors about U.S. assistance to the Tajikistan government in suppressing local insurgents, and about possible rapprochement between Washington and Uzbekistan.

Iran is also frustrated by its complete exclusion from recent U.S. plans for Afghanistan's regional economic integration. Tehran is especially concerned about Western attempts to position Afghanistan as an alternative land route connecting Pakistan and India with markets in Central Asia, Russia, and China. Although an Afghan transport corridor hardly seems feasible in the near to mid term, the mere idea already appears to have frightened Tehran.

In addition, Russia's regional position has been seriously weakened in 2012 -- a trend that Tehran regards as problematic given its longstanding view of Moscow as part of an anti-American front in Central Asia. On June 28, for example, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the Moscow-backed Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the military backbone of the future "Eurasian Union" that Russian president Vladimir Putin reputedly hopes to forge among the former Soviet republics that comprise the Commonwealth of Independent States. And in July, Tajikistan -- another CSTO member -- offered initially unacceptable conditions for prolonging the presence of the 201st Russian military base on its soil, putting the future of Moscow's troop presence in the country into question. Russian relations with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have also been tense. Tehran is worried that this decrease in Moscow's influence in Central Asia will strengthen Washington's position there; accordingly, it has sought to increase its own presence in the region.

Tehran is also concerned by what it sees as Turkey's growing influence in Central Asia. For example, the region has become an important market for Turkish goods: in 2011, Turkish trade with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan totaled \$6.8 billion, more than 50 percent higher than Iran's \$4.1 billion in trade with the same countries.

TEHRAN OFFERS CARROTS

Under these circumstances, Tehran hopes that active dialogue with the Central Asian republics can persuade them that friendship with Iran is more profitable than confrontation. The methods of persuasion have been gentle thus far: Tehran has offered numerous carrots, but no sticks.

In mid-July, for example, Turkmenistan agreed to increase its future gas and electricity exports to the Islamic Republic. And in June, Tehran reached a number of important economic agreements with Kazakhstan, including plans to finish construction of the Uzen-Etrek-Gorgan railroad connecting Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran by 2013. Then, in late July, Kyrgyzstan received a preliminary offer to join the Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan-China railroad project, with Tehran expressing its readiness to finance Bishkek's portion of the construction.

Tajikistan has received even greater Iranian attention this year. In March, Tehran agreed to take part in the construction of a highway connecting the Islamic Republic with Afghanistan and Tajikistan. And during a May 27-28 meeting of the Iranian-Tajik economic commission, the two countries reached preliminary agreements on the construction of joint oil, gas, and water pipelines. They also discussed exports of Tajik electricity to Iran as well as Iranian participation in the construction of an oil refinery in Tajikistan. And in June, Tehran decided to increase its investment in the construction of the Tajik hydroelectric plant Sangtuda-2.

More broadly, Iran spares no effort to prove its importance as a regional transport hub, which it regards as essential to securing both economic and geostrategic gains. Toward that end, Tehran actively promotes so-called "ECO Container Trains" on the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul, Istanbul-Tehran-Tashkent-Almaty, and Bandar Abbas-Almaty rail routes. Over the past two years, Iran has also sought to improve passenger and cargo capacities at its border terminals with Turkey, Iraq, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan.

IMPLICATIONS: NOT MUCH

Iran will continue to consult with Central Asian states on many issues -- in particular, border security, stabilization in Afghanistan, transport access to the Russian and Chinese markets, and the development of regional energy markets will likely be the main drivers of Tehran's diplomacy in the region in the near term. Tehran will also use its contacts with these states to convince the Iranian people that U.S. attempts to isolate the Islamic Republic are futile.

In the end, though, these efforts are unlikely to substantially change current trends in post-Soviet Central Asia. Tehran's ability to influence the regional situation is severely limited. Although this situation is partly a result of

Iran's sanctions-related economic troubles and desire to avoid open tensions with certain nonregional players (e.g., Russia and Turkey), it is also a function of foreign policy shifts exhibited by Central Asian governments themselves. As some analysts have pointed out, these countries have undergone drastic changes in self-perception over the past decade -- no longer do they see themselves as living in a landlocked, isolated region whose relations with the external world depend completely on Russia or Iran. The growing U.S., Chinese, Turkish, and Arab presence there has given them a sense of self-importance and a much wider choice of partners and opportunities, among which Iran does not seem that appealing.

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