



The West and Iran in Central Asia: more competition or cooperation?

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The Western powers and Iran have been at diplomatic loggerheads for many years over a variety of issues. Two disputes have received the most attention from Western officials, journalists and independent policy experts. The most prominent one is the controversy over Iran's nuclear program, which despite the recent interim agreement between Tehran and the P5+1 powers, remains far away from a lasting solution. Washington and its allies continue to worry that Iran remains intent on barging into the global nuclear weapons club, while the new Iranian government of Hassan Rouhani is focused on getting those countries to lift the sanctions that have greatly impeded, if not crippled, Iran's economy.

The other major source of contention consists of Western worries that Iran is expanding its radical influence in the Persian Gulf and throughout the Middle East. That concern has caused Washington and the major European Union capitals to side with the leading Sunni powers in the region, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, against Shiite Iran. The tilt is most evident in the political and logistical support that the United States and some of its allies have given to rebel forces in Syria seeking to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, Tehran's principal ally in the Middle East. Washington's noticeable bias in favor of Bahrain's pro-Saudi, Sunni monarchy, despite that regime's repressive conduct toward the country's majority Shiite population, also reflects the goal of curbing Iranian influence.

There is another theater in the feud between the West and Iran that has received less attention but is of considerable importance: the contest for influence in Central Asia.

US leaders worried greatly about Tehran's possible machinations from the moment the Soviet Union imploded and produced an assortment of independent states in the region. Even during the final year of George H. W. Bush's administration, Washington's clear goal was to thwart Iran from appealing to religious or ideological solidarity to expand its influence among Central Asia's Muslim societies. James A. Baker, Bush's Secretary of State, was quite candid about that motive for US policy in the region. In his memoirs, Baker conceded that the administration was "concerned about Iran, and supportive of Turkey's efforts to bring Central Asia into its sphere of influence."

Baker admitted further that US officials were especially worried about the potential for the development of close ties between Iran and Tajikistan. Unlike the populations of the other Central Asian countries, he noted, "the Tajiks are Persian, most of them speak a language similar

to Farsi, and thus they have more ties and contacts with Tehran.” Given those factors, Iran became “a primary topic of discussion” with Tajikistan’s president during Baker’s 1992 journey throughout Central Asia.

Washington’s determination to stymie Iranian penetration of Central Asia deepened during the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. There is no doubt that Tehran was making a concerted effort to expand its diplomatic and economic ties with the Central Asian republics, especially Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and that campaign has continued to the present day. Stephen J. Blank, Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, aptly describes Tehran’s diplomatic offensive as one of “smiles and energy.” Of the two elements, energy links - pipeline plans and other oil and gas partnerships - have been the more important.

Washington’s desire to thwart Iranian goals in Central Asia made some sense, especially during the years when hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a major player in the Iranian clerical regime. Even at that time, though, US officials may have missed some important opportunities for cooperation. George W. Bush’s administration, for example, spurned Iranian overtures to help combat Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan during the years immediately following the 9-11 attacks. Tehran, for its own reasons, wanted to weaken a radical Sunni movement that once had ties to both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. US and Iranian interests overlapped on that issue, and there was the potential for useful cooperation.

More recently, Washington and Tehran have come to realize that they share some interests in wanting to prevent Russia from strengthening its already dominant position in Central Asia. Iran, for example, wants to prevent the Caspian Basin from effectively becoming a Russian geopolitical lake. Yet the ongoing US-Iranian feud on other issues has prevented any serious contemplation of bilateral cooperation on that front, despite the overlapping interests.

Beyond those considerations, the United States and its Western allies should ponder whether the strategy of trying to isolate Iran and block pipeline projects linking Central Asian republics and that country has outlived whatever usefulness it might once have had. Indeed, Western officials should cautiously explore the possibility that meshing Iran into a network of energy and other regional relationships might have a stabilizing effect and encourage greater cooperation from Tehran. Dealing with those issues in a more flexible and creative way might even open the door to compromise and cooperation on the more intractable issues that have marked the terrible relationship between Iran and the West. Policy makers in the United States and its Western allies need to take a fresh look at Central Asia and policies toward that region.