

WEEKLY ANALYSIS

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE IRANIAN FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT TO KABUL



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE IRANIAN FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT TO KABUL

Introduction

Iran has been one of the countries that stood by the Islamic Emirate from the very beginning, maintaining its diplomatic relations with Kabul at a practical level. In addition to keeping its ambassador in Kabul, Iran continued the operations of its other diplomatic missions across various Afghan cities. Over time, Iran placed the Afghan embassy in Tehran under the supervision of the Islamic Emirate. It later accepted several diplomats appointed by the Emirate as Afghanistan's new representatives in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Over the past three years, numerous high-level delegations from the Islamic Emirate have traveled to Iran. One of the most prominent examples was the visit of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, in November 2023. On the Iranian side, delegations of relatively lower-ranking officials had visited Afghanistan until, last week, Kabul witnessed the arrival of the highest-ranking Iranian official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This raises important questions: What were the motivations behind Seyed Abbas Araghchi's visit to Kabul? And what are Tehran's objectives in making such a move under the current circumstances? It appears that the present sensitive situation, particularly with the potential return of Donald Trump to the White House, played a significant role in prompting this visit. Additionally, discussions around issues such as water resources and Afghanistan's role as one of Iran's largest trade partners were likely key factors in the Iranian Foreign Minister's presence in Kabul.

THE RETURN OF TRUMP TO THE WHITE HOUSE AND THE POTENTIAL ESCALATION OF SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN

A key factor that may have prompted the Iranian Foreign Minister's visit to Kabul is the possible return of Donald Trump to power as President of the United States. As witnessed during his previous term—and in line with the promises he has made for the coming years—one of Trump's core foreign policy objectives is to weaken Iran further.

What particularly alarms Tehran this time and leaves the country more vulnerable in the face of U.S. and Israeli pressure, is the erosion of Iran's regional alliances. The weakening of Hezbollah, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's government, and Iran's declining influence in the Middle East have led to its increased isolation in regional affairs. Additionally, Trump's anticipated return to the White House, coupled with his vows to impose even harsher sanctions, has pushed Tehran to strengthen its "Look East" diplomatic strategy. This includes initiatives such as the recently signed strategic partnership agreement with Russia.

While Iran already maintains strong relations with countries like Russia and China, it is now seeking to diversify its alliances further to better withstand U.S. sanctions. In this context, Afghanistan emerges as a potential partner that could assist Iran in circumventing these restrictions. Although relations between Iran and Afghanistan have steadily improved over the past three years, Tehran's decision to dispatch its Foreign Minister to Kabul signals an effort to elevate these ties to a strategic level.



By sending its top diplomat, Tehran aims to assess Afghanistan's capacity to serve as a critical partner should Iran's internal situation worsen due to increased sanctions? The visit reflects Iran's intention to gauge, firsthand, the extent to which it can rely on Afghanistan as part of its broader strategy to mitigate the impact of U.S. pressure.

IRAN'S EFFORTS TO FILL THE U.S. VOID IN AFGHANISTAN

Another key factor driving the Iranian Foreign Minister's visit to Kabul is the unique opportunity that has emerged for Iran in the shifting geopolitical landscape. While it was initially expected that Donald Trump would continue the previous U.S. administration's policy on Afghanistan—or perhaps even seek closer engagement with the Islamic Emirate—the reality appears to be quite the opposite.

Trump's criticism of the billions of dollars in U.S. foreign aid, including assistance to Afghanistan, coupled with the suspension of American humanitarian aid to the country, signals a growing rift between Afghanistan and the United States. While this distancing could have adverse consequences for Afghanistan, it presents a strategic advantage for countries like Iran, which remains a primary regional adversary of the U.S.

In essence, the more Afghanistan and the United States drift apart, the greater the opportunity for Iran to strengthen its ties with Kabul. Although Iran cannot fully replace the U.S. in terms of financial support or international influence, this situation offers Tehran a valuable chance to deepen its relationship with Afghanistan.

The widening gap between Kabul and Washington can be seen as a geopolitical gift for Iran. By sending its Foreign Minister to Kabul, Tehran is signaling to Afghan leaders that Iran is prepared to step up as a reliable economic partner and collaborator, ready to play a more prominent role in Afghanistan's future.

A MAJOR ECONOMIC PARTNER

During the period of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, Iran's perspective toward its eastern neighbor was primarily shaped by security concerns. The presence of American forces on Iran's eastern border heightened Tehran's sense of vulnerability, given that the U.S. is considered Iran's foremost adversary. This security-centric viewpoint inevitably influenced the nature of Iran's interactions with Afghanistan. Although economic relations between the two countries were improving at the time, Iran remained deeply wary of Afghanistan serving as a potential base for U.S. operations in the region.

However, with the return of the Islamic Emirate to power and the subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, Iran's focus has shifted from security to economics. The departure of American forces opened new avenues for Iran to engage economically with Afghanistan without the constraints of foreign interference. This transition has presented Iran with two significant opportunities:

Unrestricted Economic Engagement: Iran now has the freedom to expand its economic ties with Afghanistan without the influence of external powers, particularly the United States.



Strategic Trade Routes: Iran has positioned itself as a key access point for Afghanistan to reach international markets through its ports on open waters and overland routes connecting to Turkey and Europe.

Both countries have made considerable efforts to strengthen their economic cooperation. This has led to ambitious goals, including the projection of a \$10 billion trade horizon as a future benchmark for their bilateral relations. Additionally, Afghanistan's increased use of Iranian ports and transit routes to Turkey and even Europe has become a focal point in their partnership.

In this context, Iran's decision to send its Foreign Minister to Kabul reflects a strategic move to reinforce political ties, which, in turn, are expected to further solidify economic relations. The visit marks a significant step toward deepening bilateral cooperation, particularly in the economic sphere—an area where Iran, given its current circumstances, stands to benefit greatly.

THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN'S WATER DIPLOMACY

Among the various factors influencing the Iranian Foreign Minister's visit to Kabul, the issue of water cannot be overlooked. The Islamic Emirate's recent efforts to manage Afghanistan's transboundary water resources have prompted neighboring countries to seek dialogue with Kabul—none more so than Iran, Afghanistan's eastern neighbor.

Over the past three years, Iran has repeatedly criticized Afghanistan's water policies, viewing the Islamic Emirate's approach to water management as a potential challenge. While the Islamic Emirate acknowledges the water rights of neighboring countries and has consistently emphasized that its management of transboundary waters remains within Afghanistan's legal usage rights, Iran remains concerned. These concerns have raised the potential for tensions to escalate, possibly affecting broader relations between the two nations.

Given the growing significance of this issue, Iran dispatched its Foreign Minister to Kabul to engage in direct discussions, aiming to secure assurances that Afghanistan will honor Iran's water rights. Following his return to Tehran, the Iranian Foreign Minister highlighted the water rights issue as the primary topic of his discussions in Kabul. He also expressed optimism that Afghanistan would fulfill its obligations regarding Iran's share of transboundary water resources.

THE FUTURE OUTLOOK OF AFGHANISTAN-IRAN RELATIONS

The visit of Iran's Foreign Minister to Afghanistan, regardless of specific issues or agendas, reflects Afghanistan's growing importance in Iran's foreign policy. Given the current regional dynamics, this visit could mark a turning point in the relationship between the two nations. Strengthening ties presents mutual opportunities, especially in the economic sphere, where both countries can complement each other's needs. Afghanistan requires affordable goods, while Iran seeks new markets for its products. Afghanistan can utilize Iran's access to seaports, facilitating trade routes, while Iran can use Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asia and even China.



Moreover, Afghanistan could benefit from Iran's economic expertise, particularly in developing small industries. At the same time, Iran could expand its foreign investments by participating in Afghanistan's mining sector. Beyond economic collaboration, the Islamic Emirate can leverage Iran's attention to strengthen its bargaining power in dealings with the United States.

However, while these opportunities are promising, overly close ties with Iran could pose risks for Afghanistan. Iran's expectations in trade relations appear largely one-sided. While Iran is eager to export goods to Afghanistan, there is less enthusiasm for opening its markets to Afghan products. This one-way trade dynamic could lead to Afghanistan becoming heavily reliant on Iranian goods, a dependency that may harm Afghanistan's economy in the long run.

Another potential consequence of deepening ties with Iran is the possibility of provoking the United States. Regardless of the current level of U.S.-Afghan engagement, the U.S. continues to monitor Afghanistan closely. As a vulnerable nation, Afghanistan should avoid actions that might antagonize a major power like the U.S., particularly through overly close relations with Iran. While maintaining good relations with Iran is beneficial, Afghanistan must strike a careful balance to safeguard its broader strategic interests.

CONCLUSION

Since the return of the Islamic Emirate to power, relations between Iran and Afghanistan have continued as before. Over the past three years, both countries have made efforts to strengthen their ties by leveraging each other's capacities, particularly in boosting economic cooperation. Recently, Iran sent its Foreign Minister to Kabul in an attempt to deepen its relationship with Afghanistan.

This visit comes at a critical time when global and regional dynamics are shifting, especially with Donald Trump's rise to power in the United States. Iran's primary motivation for this diplomatic move appears to be increasing engagement with Afghanistan in anticipation of heightened sanctions and growing international pressure. Additionally, the visit likely addressed other key issues, such as water resource management and Afghanistan's emerging role as one of Iran's significant trade partners.

Two key conclusions can be drawn from this visit. First, it demonstrates that Afghanistan, under the rule of the Islamic Emirate, holds significant importance for Iran. Iran is making deliberate efforts to strengthen its ties with the current Afghan government. Politically and economically, Afghanistan presents itself as a valuable partner for Iran at this juncture. After years of heavy investment in the Middle East, where Iran has faced strategic setbacks, the country is now turning its attention toward Afghanistan. If U.S. policies under Trump further widen the gap between Afghanistan and the U.S., Iran is ready to step in and draw Afghanistan closer into its circle of regional partners. This intention was underscored by the personal visit of Iran's Foreign Minister to Kabul. In a symbolic gesture of friendship and confidence in Afghanistan's stability, the minister even took a casual stroll around the city and had tea at a local restaurant. Such public appearances serve as a subtle endorsement of the security situation in Afghanistan under the Islamic Emirate.

The second conclusion is that Iran likely anticipates facing even stricter U.S. sanctions, leading to greater political isolation and economic strain. By sending its Foreign Minister to Kabul, Tehran aims to show that it still maintains an active diplomatic presence and is not as isolated as some might assume.



Despite these developments, the Islamic Emirate must approach its relationship with Iran with caution. While fostering closer ties offers economic and political benefits, Afghanistan should carefully consider the broader geopolitical implications and maintain a balanced foreign policy to protect its national interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Given Iran's strong interest in expanding its relations with Afghanistan, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan should seize this opportunity to improve the country's economic situation in the most effective way possible.
2. The Islamic Emirate should maintain a balanced approach in its foreign policy, especially with neighboring countries, ensuring that Afghanistan is not exploited for the interests of others.
3. Considering the critical importance of water resources for Iran, it is recommended that the Islamic Emirate leverage water diplomacy to secure greater economic benefits from Iran.

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