

U.S., Iran Strategies Compete in Central Asia

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

In late April, the U.S. Defense Secretary and the Iranian President almost crossed paths in Central Asia, each in the course of high-priority political tours of the region. Whether reports are true or not, that the United States tried to get Kazakstan's government to decline Iranian President Sayyed Mohammad Khatami's visit, it is certain that the two trips were at cross-purposes. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's mission aimed at further consolidating the military and political presence of the United States in Central Asia, established in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, and the subsequent war against Afghanistan. President Khatami's mission, on the other hand, was to shore up economic and political cooperation between Iran and the Central Asian Republics, as the basis to enhance security and stability within the region, and to thwart the interference of external powers—notably the United States—seen as committed to wrecking such cooperation.

Following Sept. 11, as the Bush Administration launched the Afghan war—intended by the imperial faction moving to seize control in Washington as opening a “perpetual war” strategy—it embarked on a carrot-and-stick campaign, to convince the (former Soviet) Central Asian Republics—Tajikistan, Kazakstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan—to play along. Specifically, they were to offer up military bases to the United States. Three republics were brought to do so, while Kazakstan and Turkmenistan resisted, agreeing only to cooperation for humanitarian activities.

As the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* noted on May 7, these bases are not only aimed east and south into Asia, but also enable U.S. power “to attack Iraq without living in Kuwait.”

American Troops, ‘As Long as Necessary’

Rumsfeld visited Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakstan, and Afghanistan, with the message that the U.S. presence would be long-term, and would be expanded. In Kyrgyzstan on April 26, he gave a pep talk to a group of the 1,000 U.S. troops stationed there, mainly at the Manas Air Base, and in answer to questions as to how long the U.S. troops should remain there, he replied, “As long as necessary.”

Rumsfeld flew into Ashgabat on April 28, for meetings with Turkmen President Sapurmurat Niyazov, Defense Minister Rejebay Arazov, and Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov. Although Rumsfeld pushed hard for Turkmenistan to join its neighbors in offering bases for U.S. troops, the government, whose policy is one of strict neutrality, refused. According to

Turkmen diplomatic sources, the only concessions made were related to humanitarian aid for Afghanistan. The same was the case in Kazakstan, his next stop.

While the U.S. Defense Secretary was in Afghanistan, U.S. Special Operations and Delta Force units there began to deploy on the Pakistani side of the border, in the tribal belt where al-Qaeda/Taliban forces are said to be located. Despite Pakistan's requests that the United States keep this secret, and its ritual denials that the Americans were on its territory, actual combat was reported. While Rumsfeld was still in the region, it was announced that U.S. aircraft would be used to monitor the Afghan-Pakistani border crossings. On May 1, it was made known that the United States was moving parts of more than two battalions of the 101st Airborne Division to the border region, which again confirmed the existence of serious fighting there.

Building a ‘Coalition for Peace’

The potential of Iran to develop, parallel to China, as the pillars of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, is the explicit target of American policy. While Rumsfeld sought to expand the “anti-terrorist coalition,” to include more Central Asian Republics, Khatami called for building a “coalition for peace” among those same nations, based on economic cooperation. A glance at the map shows that Iran is *the* transport bridge for all the landlocked Central Asian Republics, to Persian Gulf ports, and thence, world markets. Since 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the independence of the five former Soviet republics in Central Asia, Iran has defined its foreign policy increasingly in terms of its geographical and strategic position. It has aggressively pursued the construction of transportation and pipeline infrastructure, to allow the Central Asian Republics to become part of the Eurasian Land-Bridge network, and to export their massive oil and gas resources to international markets.

In the last week of April, Khatami had again experienced, albeit indirectly, the weight of U.S. interference in the region's development. The Ashgabat summit of the Caspian Sea littoral states—Iran, Russia, Kazakstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan—had as its top agenda item, to establish a legal regime for exploiting the rich resources of the Caspian Sea. The resources had long been jointly shared by the U.S.S.R and Iran, according to treaties signed in 1920 and 1941. With the breakup of the U.S.S.R. these two littoral states became five, and a new legal status had to be found—no small task. The thorny fundamental problem is whether the sea and its riches should be divided equally among the five—20% for each, as Iran proposes—or according to the shoreline of each state.

That the summit ended on April 24 without any conclusive document, was immediately dubbed a failure by some foreign press; however, the participants agreed that the mere fact that the summit occurred, after years of difficulties, made it a success, and that it would be unreasonable to expect a final

Iran and Central Asia: Rail Connections



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agreement at the first meeting. The five countries pledged to refrain from using force or creating tension in the Caspian Sea, and to seek to resolve the issues of contention through understanding and compromise.

All five know that one major obstacle is massive financial and political influence exerted by U.S. interests on Azerbaijan, which has vociferously opposed Iran. Khatami said that Iran “announces that any agreement on the sea will be valid only if it is approved unanimously by the littoral countries,” and, according to Iran’s IRNA news agency, called on the

coastal states, “in this very case Azerbaijan, to refrain from operating on the 20% of the sea which [Iran] regards as its minimum share on the bed and the surface of the sea.”

In remarks after his address to the summit, Khatami stressed, “One of the most important issues raised in the summit was that the Caspian Sea belongs to the five coastal countries, and that nobody should interfere in the region. Most of the regional countries,” he added, “believe that any foreign interference in the region must be avoided.” Iran has well-founded fears, that the United States could extend its military

presence to the Caspian Sea, through Azerbaijan. Khatami also reiterated Iran's willingness to provide the "shortest, most secure, and cheapest route for the transfer of regional energy to the world market," a reference to pipelines through Iran, for Turkmen and Kazak oil—again systematically opposed by the United States.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's position converged with that of Khatami on the key point: Putin "reiterated that the Caspian problems should be settled by the sea littoral states and without intervention of foreign forces." Iran will host the next Caspian Sea meeting.

At the conclusion of the summit, the Iranian president made a state visit to Almaty, Kazakstan; went to Uzbekistan, where he held talks in Tashkent, and visited the historic city of Bukhara; visited Kyrgyzstan; and ended his trip in Tajikistan. The focus of the tour was to consolidate ties with the Central Asian Republics, in the face of the accelerated U.S. efforts to establish a political and military hold over the region. In Kazakstan, Khatami denounced President Bush's "axis of evil" notion and the U.S. penetration of the region. "The presence of armed forces of large non-local states in Central Asia prompts Iran's concern," he said. He called the presence of U.S. troops in the region a "humiliation."

While Khatami was in Kazakstan, an official of Iran's railway company RSE announced in the Parliament, that the first regular passenger train service between Almaty and Tehran would begin on May 2. There already exists fruitful cooperation between the two countries, for energy transfer. In one of its many regional swap agreements, Iran receives Kazak oil via the Caspian Sea, and Iranian oil is then transferred to the Persian Gulf. Also under discussion is a pipeline from Kazakstan through Turkmenistan to Iran. On April 24, the two states signed a Protocol for Commercial and Technical and Cultural Cooperation and declaration of friendly relations. Kazak media noted the coincidence of Rumsfeld's tour and Khatami's, and charged that the United States was attempting to sabotage the growing cooperation among Iran and the Central Asian Republics. One source in the Kazak Foreign Ministry was quoted stressing that common Russian-Iranian interests may lead to "a geopolitical union in the region in opposition to the U.S.A."

During his visit to Uzbekistan, one of the countries which is most closely cooperating with the United States, including military basing rights, Khatami launched a counter-proposal to the permanent war strategy lurking behind the "anti-terrorist coalition." According to IRNA, Khatami, in a speech at Tashkent University, said, "Today, due to the advancement of destructive arms and weapons of mass destruction, the main issue is the probability of a war, and a massacre, and that whether the scales will be tipped for the duration of human life or its annihilation." Referring to Iran's proposal for a Dialogue of Civilizations, which was endorsed by the United Nations for 2001, and the rebuilding of the ancient Silk Road under that idea, he said, "Now, a fundamental step has to be

taken in order to realize that: global coalition for peace." In Uzbekistan, Khatami also inaugurated a pharmaceutical plant constructed with Iranian capital. Ministers of the two countries are discussing plans for an Iranian-Uzbek joint bank.

In Bukhara, Uzbekistan, which, with its 2,500 years, is the oldest city in Central Asia, Khatami visited the Great Mosque, the Mir Arab Theological school, the Winter Castle of the Bukhara king, and the shrine of Sheikh Bahaddine Nagshbandi. He then travelled to Samarkand, where he visited the historical Islamic complexes of Shah-zنده and Imam Bokhari. The Shah-zنده complex houses the tomb of Qesam ibn-Abbas, the cousin of the Prophet Mohammed. The Imam Bokhari complex is dedicated to the memory of the author of many books, the most significant of which is the *Jame ol-Samih*, a collection of the holy quotations of the Prophet. The Bibi-Khanum, a great architectural monument, was constructed on the order of Amir Teymour (Tamerlane), for his wife, daughter of the monarch, Qazan Khan.

These two great cities share not only the architectural tradition with Iran, but also the Persian-language culture.

In Kyrgyzstan, which also has Persian-language culture, Khatami was greeted by President Askar Akayev as the President of a "friend" and a "great Islamic government." Akayev stressed the "high respect" which his "government and nation" have for "the great and rich culture of Iran." In a joint press conference, Khatami addressed the massive U.S. presence in the small, poor country of Kyrgyzstan. He reiterated that any crises breaking out in the region, would originate not locally but from "abroad." He stated that Iran considered its security as dependent on regional security.

Kyrgyz President Imomali Rakhmonov singled out the importance of a road constructed by Iranian experts, between China and Tajikistan, and a hydroelectric plant, as well as agricultural cooperation. Both Presidents emphasized the need to free the region of foreign troops.

Importance of Tajikistan's Water

In Tajikistan, whose civil war ended five years ago through a joint effort of Russia and Iran, President Khatami finished his tour. A special feature of the cooperation discussed there, concerns the development of Tajikistan's massive water resources. Khatami stated that Iran was ready to help harness the country's water energy resources by building dams and hydroelectric plants. "A suitable tapping of this important resource is key to the economic development of Tajikistan and strengthening of stability in the region," he told a state dinner. Tajikistan possesses 950 rivers, from which 60 larger regional rivers originate.

Khatami also offered help to connect Tajikistan, a landlocked country, to international waters, through ground transportation systems. He said the countries would "be active in revitalizing the historic 'Silk Road' which links China and Europe." To make Tajikistan's development possible, Khatami spoke of Iran's willingness to extend project credits.