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IRANO-AFGHAN DISPUTE OVER THE HELMAND WATERS

A.H.H. ABIDI*

In the wake of the process of British military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf late in 1971, Iran initiated a forward and assertive foreign policy in the region. Its latent objective was the quest for a system of collective action in which it could play an appropriate role, one corresponding to its newly acquired financial riches and the consequent military and political weight. In this context, Iran's age-old disputes with its eastern and western neighbours—Afghanistan and Iraq—presented serious constraints. Iran found it imperative to resolve them. The Helmand River Water Treaty, signed with Afghanistan in 1973, and the border treaty with Iraq, concluded in 1975, thus fall within the pattern of Iran's nascent phase of foreign policy. Though firm in its approach, Iran also evinced a spirit of accommodation and conciliation. In terms of historical setting, strategic aspect, political dimension, and economic content, Iran's dispute with Afghanistan over its share in the waters of the Helmand River seems fairly well defined and is less tempestuous than the complicated land and water frontier problem with Iraq. It is beyond the scope of the present study to offer a comparative analysis of either the dimensions of the two problems or the style of the Iranian approach. The purpose is merely to examine the various facets of the Irano-Afghan problem and assess the approaches of the two countries, as also the impact of the problem on the prospects of bilateral and regional peace and stability.

The Irano-Afghan problem, which is more than a century old, is a product of the interplay of a variety of physiographical, geographical, historical, political, and economic factors. One can also see in it, albeit on a small scale, the operation of diverse political phenomena and concepts. Some of the more notable among these are mediaeval-style warfare and quarrel for territorial gains; the classical nineteenth-century European imperialism and inter-state scramble for influence, with the Europeans in the role of "honest brokers" in Asian countries; debasement of the ruling oligarchy and its subservience to, and abetment of, the Europeans; attempts by the resurgent nationalist regimes to shake off the domi-

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JULY- SEPTEMBER 1977

neering influence of the Europeans; a projection of the tensions of the Super-Power Cold War of the period since the Second World War; and the use of multilateral and bilateral approaches to settle inter-state disputes. Besides, the problem also provides an example of the processes in which the practical aspects of the efforts to promote regional co-operation, the subordination of political considerations to economic compulsions and interests, and an embryonic functionalist approach to the task of building abiding relations between states are very much in evidence.

At the outset, the constituent elements and outlines of the problem may be presented. Historically, the dispute can be related to the evolution of the modern nation state of Afghanistan, which includes a good deal of the territory which, in ancient times, according to the Iranians, formed part of the Iranian Empire. It is not necessary for the purposes of this article to go into the complex and controversial history of it all. Our concern here is with the specific area of the Helmand basin known as Sistan. In the year A.D. 1747 Ahmad Shah Abdali annexed a major part of it to Afghanistan. Afghan control over the area lasted for over a century. After 1851, Iran again succeeded in exerting considerable sway over Sistan. In general, the Iranian claim to Sistan rests upon two major grounds: ancient rights, and present possession of a part of it; the Afghan claim, on the other hand, rests primarily on the continuous exercise of sovereignty since 1747. It may be noted that since ancient times, Sistan had been a recognized dependency of Iran and the home of two legendary heroes—Rustam and Kai. Besides, Iran's interest in Sistan is not just emotional. There are some powerful geographical factors behind it, too. The Helmand basin is an area of low rainfall, with an average of 2 to 3 inches of rain a year. The only source of maintaining agriculture and undertaking development projects is the water of the Helmand River in its lower reaches. Defined in terms of the total catchment area, the Helmand basin covers 135,140 square miles, but because of the virtual partition, just a little more than one-tenth falls in Iranian territory.¹ This includes Hamun-e Helmand, which is the largest single expanse of fresh water within the Iranian plateau. The volume of water flowing into Iranian territory through the Helmand and its distributaries crossing the upper riparian state—Afghanistan—considerably fluctuates not only seasonally but also from year to year. The main river, in a normal year, delivers 60,000 cubic feet of water per second in flood conditions and 2,000 cubic feet of water during the dry season.² One estimate is that of the 1,200 square miles of the lake area formed at the high-water period (May) an area of 450 square miles dries up each year; another 300 square miles turns into a swamp; and the rest remains a lake.³ For want of adequate harnessing projects on either side, much of the water goes to waste, either causing

¹W.B. Fisher, *Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge, 1968), vol. 1, p. 77.

²Naval Intelligence Division, *Persia* (Geographical Handbook series) (London, 1945), p. 116.

³Fisher, n. 1, p. 78.

siltage or creating swamps. Whereas Afghanistan is in an advantageous position in that it controls both the headwaters of the Helmand River and the drainage sump of the Gaud-e Zirreh, Iran faces the difficulty of regulating water that is heavy and turbid. Besides, Iranian Sistan suffers from intense evaporation and soil erosion caused by the proverbial "Wind of 120 Days". Moreover, there is slower replenishment of water due to a decline in inflow. Consequently, there has been a marked decline and dwindling of agriculture and depopulation of the area. These twin developments are disturbing to the Iranians. The fact is that because of its inhospitable climate, the area has not received adequate attention in the development plans of the Government of Iran over the years. Recently, however, the Government seems to have realized the problem, for it has initiated certain tentative measures to harness the water potential and develop the region.⁴ In earlier times, it used to blame Afghanistan for withholding from it its due share of the water. What was meant by "due share" was never defined.

The problem is also related to a portion of the southern border between Iran and Afghanistan. It may be mentioned that the Helmand forms the Irano-Afghanistan boundary for about seventy-five miles. Iran is not yet reconciled to the loss of large tracts of Sistan. Till about the middle of the nineteenth century, it made several attempts, though in vain, to assert its claim. By the use of military force, it occupied the whole of Sistan proper, i.e. the country lying between the Hamun in the north and west and the Helmand below the Kohak Dam in the east. The Government of Afghanistan contested it. The basic issue in dispute was the determination of the Irano-Afghan border in this sector. Both the countries turned to Britain for help in arriving at a settlement. This was a turning-point, for it enabled Britain to involve itself in the dispute in the midst of the larger Anglo-Russian scramble for influence in these two countries. Before proceeding to analyse this aspect, we shall examine the Iranian and Afghan perceptions of the problem relating to the Helmand basin.

Generally speaking, till 1903-5, both Iran and Afghanistan considered the problem dual—that of border and the respective shares of the two countries in the waters of the Helmand. The border aspect received more emphasis. The Iranians nurtured a grievance over the partition of Sistan. For geographical reasons, they were keen to acquire control over a wider area of the basin. But one limitation was that, even though sway over the whole basin would have enlarged Iranian territory, the problem over water distribution would still have

⁴It was reported in December 1973 that the Province of Sistan-Baluchistan, the least developed region in Iran, had been chosen for having its problems and potentials assessed. The Ministry of Co-operatives and Rural Affairs prepared new projects for the general welfare of farmers, and a sum of 237 million rials was allocated for the projects. However, according to the Minister, this amount was not sufficient for the purpose. For comparative statistical details about the process of development in recent years, see *Statistical Yearbook of Iran 1352 (Plan and Budget Organization)* (Tehran, 1975); and *Kayhan* (weekly international edn) (Tehran), 15 December 1973 and 20 April 1974.

remained as the headwaters and a larger course of the Helmand would still be in Afghan territory. Conversely, if being a land-locked country, Afghanistan had aimed at an expansion southwestwards, towards an opening on the Gulf, possession even of the whole of Iranian Sistan would not have fulfilled the Afghan objective as a vast part of Iranian Baluchistan would still lie in between. An essential mitigating feature of the problem over water was that it was not permanent. It arose only in times of drought, and then it affected both the regions of Sistan in a uniform manner. There were other compulsions. Iran came to control the delta distribution of the Helmand. The lower and flatter parts, where water naturally collected, could most economically be used for irrigation and for a revival of agriculture. The development potential was high, but it was blunted partly by the irrigation schemes undertaken in Afghanistan. Besides, the main problem was one of harnessing the river and checking floods. Thus, by its very nature, the problem entailed a coalescence of interests of the two riparian states in regional development, but it was complicated by lack of political understanding and co-ordination. The Helmand basin epitomized the problem—how to secure bilateral political harmony towards making superior and mutually beneficial use of geographical environments.⁵ The conditions prerequisite for such a process were a cooling-off period between Iran and Afghanistan and an aggregation of dominant complementary economic factors and interests. It was also essential that the two Governments should be able to make independent decisions. But, perhaps, such a realization had not dawned. The two Governments did not trust each other. The pitch was further queered when, instead of tackling the issue through bilateral understanding, it was decided to seek foreign intervention and advice. It was a retrograde step. Here, Britain, the foreign Power that was invited to intervene, actively exploited the situation with a view to promoting its own influence. The core of British policy was to create a cordon obstructing any Russian advance towards the south which might disturb and menace British imperial interests in India and its approaches through the West Asian landmass. Britain had already cultivated its independent and beneficial relations with Iran as well as Afghanistan. This task was facilitated by the egocentricism of the ruling classes who were anxious to buttress their own positions and who were least concerned about protecting the national interests of their peoples.

The Irano-Afghan problem, in its dual form, entered upon a new phase in which the British authorities were allowed to acquire a dominant role. In order to analyse and assess the problem, reference to certain facts seems inevitable. The erstwhile bilateral Irano-Afghan problem tended to widen when, in 1862, in the face of Dost Mohammad's demand for the submission of a portion of Sistan, the Shah of Iran invoked Article 7 of the Anglo-Iranian Treaty of 1857.⁶ The

⁵Fisher, n. 1, p. 81.

⁶Signed on 4 March 1857, the treaty made no provision for Sistan. Text in C.U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries* (Calcutta, 1934), vol. 13, pp. 81-85.

idea was to seek British blessings to the initiating of military action against the Afghans. Pursuing a policy of "masterly inactivity" the British Government denied its recognition of Iranian sovereignty over Sistan and left both parties to make good their claims by force of arms.⁷ Towards the end of 1865 the Iranian Army marched farther into Sistan occupying further territory south-west of the Helmand, and the British Government stuck to its *laissez-faire* policy. But it was soon abandoned when, in 1870, the ruler of Afghanistan threatened to go to war with Iran over Sistan. In the face of the Russian advances in Central Asia, the British Government decided to intervene and prevent further deterioration. This was facilitated when Iran, having achieved its short-term objective, showed its desire to place its relations with Afghanistan on a satisfactory and recognized basis and sought for British good offices.

Responding positively, and acting in terms of Article 6 of the Treaty of 1857, the British Government agreed to offer arbitration on the question of the sovereignty and boundaries of the whole of Sistan on both sides of the Helmand River. This was to be done "on the basis of ancient rights and present possession."⁸ The agreed terms of reference provided that the British, Iranian, and Afghan Governments would nominate the Commissioners to probe into the problem. Whereas the Iranian and Afghan sides would state and substantiate their diverse claims, the British Commissioner would state his opinion as an arbitrator. Should either the Iranian or the Afghan Government not agree to this award, reference would be made to the British Government whose decision would be final and binding. The implications of the understanding were clear: Britain was allowed to assume the role of an "honest broker", and the two Asian Governments abdicated their sovereign right of decision-making to the arbitrary act of a European Power.

The tripartite Commission met early in 1872, and the arbitral award was announced in August of that year.⁹ As regards the main issue of sovereignty over Sistan, the British arbitrator dismissed the Iranian claim based on ancient rights. He found those rights uncertain and not clearly supported by historical evidence. On the other hand, more than a century of Afghan control over Sistan was considered cogent evidence in favour of Afghanistan. The second criterion, viz the criterion of "present possession", was more vexed; for both Iran and Afghanistan exercised control over portions of Sistan. Also, the exact geographical definition of "Sistan" at the time of arbitration was "very vague" as the "ancient limits have long become obsolete".¹⁰ The award, therefore, virtually

⁷Ibid., pp. 33-34. According to one interpretation, the effect of the British refusal to interfere was to authorize an appeal to arms. G.P. Tate, *The Kingdom of Afghanistan: A Historical Sketch* (Delhi, 1973), Indian edn, p. 169.

⁸Aitchison, n. 6, pp. 33-34.

⁹Known as the Goldsmid Award after the British Commissioner, General Sir Frederick Goldsmid. For the substance of the award, see Aitchison, n. 6, p. 210.

¹⁰*Sistan Arbitration*, vol. I, pp. 395-414.

partitioned Sistan into "Sistan Proper" and "Outer Sistan" and gave the former to Iran and the latter to Afghanistan. These two regions were separated by the Helmand River. Although the two areas were broadly defined, their borders were not delimited. The problem of water was dealt with in an incidental manner. Iran's need for water was, in general, recognized, though the volume was not specified. Furthermore, the award emphatically stated that "no works are to be carried out on either side calculated to interfere with the requisite supply of water for irrigation on both banks of the Helmand".¹¹ Iran was unhappy with the award at this stage, and it preferred an appeal. Eventually, however, lacking in assertive force, both Iran and Afghanistan accepted it, and the British Government confirmed it. On both the counts of border and water percentage, the award was inconclusive. It was a manifestation of the deliberate British policy of not providing final solutions to the problems of their client states as, otherwise, the British position could be considered dispensable. Demarcation of the border and determination of the share of water would still keep the issue open and render the disputing Governments dependent on continued British good will.

The award did not provide a solution. In fact, it aggravated the problem by cutting the irrigation system of the region into two. Also, since the Helmand often changed its bed and the lagoon acquired a new position, disputes did recur. However, being minor, they were mutually and amicably settled by the Iranian and Afghan officials. All the same, during 1900-2, owing partly to a wide shift in the course of the river westwards, partly to an abnormal deficiency of water, and partly to more strained relations between the two Governments, a series of border-water disputes arose. Being an aggrieved party and more dependent on Britain, Iran again invoked Article 6 of its treaty with that country and sought for further arbitration on the twin issues. It made it very clear that any future award "must completely comply" with the Goldsmid Award of 1872. The British Government, therefore, constituted separate commissions to arbitrate the two problems. They were headed by an officer named Colonel A. H. McMahon. In their composition, nature, and power, they were like the earlier Goldsmid Commission.

Colonel McMahon, British Commissioner on the Sistan Boundary Commission, redefined the boundary-line between Iran and Afghanistan in his arbitral award of November 1903.¹² The award was accepted *in toto* by the Governments concerned. Thereafter, the boundary was mostly demarcated, and a statement on it was sent to the respective Governments on 1 February 1905.¹³ Following the demarcation, only the delta distribution of the Helmand River fell within Iranian territory.

The Commission on the Sistan Water Question began its work early in 1903. After "exhaustive measurements, observations, and enquiries", McMahon deli-

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Text in Aitchison, n. 6, p. 279.

¹³Text, *ibid.*, pp. 279-82.

vered the arbitral award on 10 April 1905. In the preamble, it was stated that the conditions under which arbitration had been agreed to by the Iranian and Afghan Governments was that the award should be in accordance with the terms of the Goldsmid Award. Goldsmid's injunction on the question of water, as quoted, was that "no works are to be carried out on either side calculated to interfere with the requisite supply of water for irrigation on both banks of the Helmand". This was a mutually accepted formula. McMahon also referred to the clarification made by the British Foreign Secretary in 1873 that the above clause "should not be understood to apply either to existing canals or to old and disused canals that it may be desired to put in proper repair, nor would it interfere with the excavation of new canals provided that the requisite supply on both banks is not diminished". Though the Goldsmid Award conceded that Iran had a right to receive "a requisite supply of water", the volume of water fairly representing "a requisite supply" was not defined. The McMahon Commission devoted itself to determining this point. The survey revealed that Sistan suffered more from an excess than a deficiency of water, that only in very exceptional or abnormal years of low river had any question of sufficiency of water arisen in Sistan, and that at such times of water scarcity Afghan Sistan suffered equally with Iranian Sistan. It was ascertained that one-third of the water which reaches Sistan, at Band-e Kamal Khan would suffice for the proper irrigation of all existing cultivation in Iranian Sistan and also allow of a large future extension of that cultivation. A notable point in the award was the following stipulation:

For satisfactory compliance of the award and avoiding fresh references to the British Government and expenses on special Missions, a British officer of irrigation experience should be permanently attached to the British Consulate at Sistan. He would be empowered to give an opinion, when required by either party, on any case of doubt or dispute over water questions.¹⁴

Under other provisions, checks and balances were created to ensure that Afghanistan's rights to the Helmand River, by virtue of its geographical position as the upper riparian state, were restricted in favour of Iran in accordance with the Goldsmid Award, and Iran was denied the right of alienating the water rights thus acquired to any other Power without the consent of Afghanistan. The latter clause checkmated any future attempt by a rival Power in cultivating its influence through seeking participation in the development schemes in Iran in the region. This award was not accepted in its entirety by Afghanistan and was altogether rejected by Iran. Whereas Afghan grievance arose out of the restrictions placed on their future irrigation and development plans and obligation to ensure one-third of the water discharge to Iran, the Iranians felt that the percentage assigned was short of their requirements, which were never quantified. Naturally, they

¹⁴Text of the award, *ibid.*, pp. 28-56.

felt "more favourably treated" under the Goldsmid Award, which conceded the Iranian right in vague terms. The British Foreign Office took the position that Iran could not reject the present award and that it could only appeal to the British Government. It also warned Iran that if it failed to file an appeal within a reasonable period of time, the award would be regarded as final and binding.¹⁵

Following the two arbitral awards, by 1905, the duality of the Irano-Afghan dispute over the Helmand basin largely vanished. When Iran and Afghanistan accepted the award of the Sistan Boundary Commission, the border aspect of the problem was amicably resolved. But, as the award on the Sistan waters satisfied neither party, this problem lingered. However, in view of the developments connected with the constitutional revolution and the paralysing of the Government during the first two decades of the present century, the general focus shifted to internal affairs, and the external problem with Afghanistan received low priority.

In the wake of the resurrection of Iran brought about by the *coup d'etat* in February 1921 and the twilight of struggle for power between Sayyid Ziya' al-Din Tabatabai and Reza Khan, there was urgent need to solicit the friendship of Iran's neighbours. Shortly after the ouster of Tabatabai (May) but before Reza Khan assumed royalty, a Treaty of Friendship between Iran and Afghanistan was signed in Tehran on 22 June 1921.¹⁶ At that time, bonds of race, need for good-neighbourly relations, and even Islamic unity were emphasized. After his emergence to power, and in his struggle for independence from Russia and Britain, Reza Shah sought closer relations with his neighbours, particularly Afghanistan, Iraq, and Turkey. He visualized such relations also as a step towards regional co-operation among states who were involved in a similar struggle. Iran and Afghanistan agreed that all clauses and provisions of the Treaty of 1921 should continue to be the basis of their relations. They reiterated this in a subsequent Treaty of Friendship and Security, signed on 27 November 1927.¹⁷ They committed themselves to non-aggression and agreed in detail for arbitration procedures on disputes not settled through ordinary diplomatic negotiations. Having attempted to convince Afghanistan of Iran's bona fides, Reza Shah turned to settle the border and water problems with Afghanistan. In March 1934 the two Governments agreed, under the terms of the Treaty of 1927, to submit their frontier dispute to a "neutral Power" for arbitration. This country was Turkey.¹⁸

There was an attempt to settle the water problem also, and, on 26 January 1938, Iran and Afghanistan concluded a treaty. Iran's action showed that, in the

¹⁵Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy of Iran: A Developing Nation in World Affairs, 1500-1941* (Charlottesville, Va, 1966), p. 61.

¹⁶Ratification documents were exchanged in Kabul on 7 September 1923. Text in *League of Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 33, pp. 295-301.

¹⁷Text in *League of Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 107, pp. 445-51.

¹⁸The specific purpose was the settlement of differences over an area called Musa Abad and the determination of that sector of the Irano-Afghan border which had not been demarcated till then. Even though there was some criticism in Iran of this award, the Shah accepted it. Ramazani, n. 15, p. 268.

wake of its new foreign policy emphasizing regional co-operation and security, it had given up seeking the good offices of a European Power. Under the new treaty, which embodied the substance of the Goldsmid Award, the two countries agreed to share the waters of the Helmand below the Kamal Khan Dam on an equitable basis. Afghanistan undertook not to construct new canals below the dam which might augment its water supply, and Iran on its part committed itself not to initiate projects which might reduce the Afghan share. In an annexed protocol, it was mutually agreed that the purpose of the agreement was to maintain the irrigation system in Sistan. In addition, Iran declared that it had no intention of interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs, and Afghanistan correspondingly assured Iran that it would not impede or stop the flow of water to Sistan. Whereas Iran ratified the agreement as well as the protocol, the Afghan Parliament approved only the agreement. In spite of the two bilateral treaties of friendship and the quadripartite Sa'adabad Pact¹⁹ and the Treaty of 1938, all aimed at ensuring inter-state and regional harmony, suspicion seemed to linger. The Afghan attitude at this time is succinctly stated by a perceptive scholar. Professor Ramazani writes:

The Afghan attitude was merely a manifestation of the fact that traditional suspicion reinforced by nationalistic sentiments tended to obscure the mutual advantages that the two Muslim countries could derive from the settlement of their old dispute and from the implementation of the principles of cooperation in the fields of economic development, trade, transit, and communications. . . .²⁰

The period of harmony and understanding in the region was short-lived as the national interests and economic compulsions of individual states proved overbearing. Afghanistan's main drainage systems are those of the Helmand, and the main problem was that of harnessing the river and checking floods. So, in the late 1930s, the Government initiated the Helmand Valley multipurpose development project for harnessing the water for power, irrigation, modernization of agriculture, and reclamation of land for the sedentarization of tribes. In this ambitious project, none of the Sa'adabad fraternity was capable of providing the technical knowhow or willing to offer financial aid. Hence Afghanistan had to look outside. First, it sought the assistance of engineers from Japan. The modest target at that time was the reconstruction of the old Boghra Canal on the western bank of the Helmand near Girishk. During the Second World War, although Japanese collaboration was suspended, the Afghans went ahead

¹⁹Signed on 8 July 1937, it was a non-aggression pact between Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Turkey. In the context of the bilateral dispute over the Helmand waters, Iran and Afghanistan could be said to have agreed not to take recourse to aggression and to resolve their dispute by peaceful means. English text in H.M. Davis, ed., *Constitutions, Electoral Laws, Treaties of States in the Near and Middle East* (Durham, N.C., 1947), pp 433-6.

²⁰Ramazani, n. 15, p. 269.

with the work. By 1946, they decided to expand by irrigating not only the flood plain area below Girishk but also the Nad-e Ali and Marja tracts on the river terraces to the south-west. This plan required the use of modern equipment and engineering techniques which were clearly beyond the capacity and means of Afghanistan. The Afghan Government, therefore, turned to the US firm of Morrison-Knudsen, not specifically for the Helmand project but to carry out a series of public works throughout the country as part of a co-ordinated development plan.²¹

Independent countries have the sovereign right to frame plans for their own development and to decide on the ways and means of implementing and financing them. It being so, it is difficult to quarrel with the Afghan Government's decision to entrust this project to the Americans. The fall-out of this decision, however, was diverse and widespread, for it heralded the involvement of a major world Power in the development schemes of Afghanistan. It is not that the Americans provided technical assistance alone. The schemes needed money, and the Afghans looked to the Americans for this as well. The timing was significant. It occurred when the Cold War had already begun and when the Azerbaijan crisis had arisen in Iran. The simple move by the Afghan Government thus got enmeshed in wider international politico-strategic complications. More details will follow below.

Meanwhile the utility of the Helmand Valley project itself was questioned on technical grounds. It was suggested that the Nad-e Ali and Marja dams, built with enthusiasm, had the storage and distribution capacity for more land than can or should be irrigated. Thousands of acres that were not fit for irrigation were irrigated and overirrigated, with the result that water tables rose, the soil became salinized, and costly reclamation works had to be undertaken. Tracts of land were abandoned within the project, and, consequently, the hoped-for rate of development was curtailed.²² Not only was the project costly and controversial in Afghanistan,²³ but it was also seen as detrimental to Iranian Sistan.²⁴ The increasing diversion of the Helmand waters in Afghan territory created the problem of maintaining an adequate water level in the delta basin in Iran. Although no hydrological data were compiled, the Iranians felt that through its new projects Afghanistan had not only violated the relevant restrictions on new constructions and failed to fulfil its obligation to release one-third of the discharge but also ignored the commitments it had undertaken under the protocol of 1938, which it had not ratified.

The ingredients of the problem that Iran faced could attract the provisions

²¹Donald N. Wilber, *Afghanistan: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1962), p. 237.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 240.

²³It was seen by progressive and neutralist segments as an embodiment of American influence.

²⁴Fisher, n. 1, p. 81.

in international law on the rights and obligations of the riparian states *vis-a-vis* international rivers. According to Oppenheim:

No state is allowed to alter the natural conditions of the territory of a neighbouring state. For this reason, a state is not only forbidden to stop or divert the flow of a river which runs from its own to a neighbouring state, but likewise to make such use of the water of the river as either causes danger to the neighbouring state or prevents it from making proper use of the flow of the river on its part.²⁵

Strange as it may seem, Iran never took recourse to a reference to the International Court of Justice. Instead, having sought British arbitration earlier, it accepted US mediation in 1947.

Picking up the thread from the point above where Afghanistan had decided to seek technical assistance from the United States for the Helmand Valley project, the subsequent agreement between Iran and Afghanistan to accept US mediation in the water problem led to a new course. At this time the United States was engaged in the process of expanding its influence in the region, and this applied to both Iran and Afghanistan. The US Government visualized the development of the Helmand basin as the functional instrument for bringing these two southern neighbours of the Soviet Union closer to each other and both under its own influence. Conversely, both Iran and Afghanistan solicited US technical and financial aid. Whereas the Afghan request was related to the Helmand Valley projects, the Shah of Iran approached the United States to seek aid for his country's first Seven-Year Plan. The US response was wary. Early economic subventions were made by the Export-Import Bank (Eximbank), which in 1950, approved a loan of \$ 21 million to Afghanistan and a loan of \$25 million to Iran. The amounts were much less than the stated demands of the debtor states. Whereas the loan to Afghanistan was given for the construction of dams on the Helmand and Arghandab rivers and on the Boghra Canal, the loan to Iran was for general development as it did not have any project in hand on the Helmand delta. US policy became clearer when agreements under the Point Four Programme were concluded with Iran (October 1950) and Afghanistan (February 1951), and the US firm, Morrison-Knudsen, was entrusted with the task of carrying out an integrated development plan for the Helmand basin.

In order to cover up its solitary efforts and to soothe Soviet apprehensions, the United States adopted a mediatory role and persuaded Iran and Afghanistan to sort out their differences through bilateral negotiations. In their talks in the United States, although the Iranians and the Afghans could not narrow down their differences, a welcome development for US policy and approach was their

²⁵L. Oppenheim, *International Law: A Treatise* (London, 1955), edn 8, vol. 1, p. 475.

agreement that a tripartite neutral commission²⁶ should probe into the problem and suggest the basis for an amicable settlement. It was a major departure from the earlier system of arbitration. The agency for suggesting a solution was broadened to a multinational level. Unlike in the earlier commissions, the parties to the dispute were not to be members of the Commission, which was supposed to be neutral and whose recommendations were to be advisory and not arbitrary. Ironically, the United States, whose engineering and financial aid had tended to alter the character of the Helmand water dispute, was included in this "neutral" Commission. While noting that a permanent solution to the problem could not be suggested for want of precise hydrological data, the Commission recommended²⁷ a temporary arrangement. Under it Afghanistan was to release to Iran 22 cubic metres of water per second during normal years. Afghanistan accepted this recommendation and even offered to give 26. However, Iran persisted in its claim that it was entitled to a larger volume and refused to accept the Commission's findings.

The Irano-Afghan problem thus remained unresolved. US policy, too, failed to make much headway. Matters became further complicated when, in 1953, Iran and Afghanistan perceptibly parted company so far as their foreign policies were concerned. In the thick of the Anglo-Iranian dispute over oil nationalization and the emergent breach between the nationalists and the Shah, the United States overcame its reluctance to tread on the toes of Britain and extended its support, both surreptitiously and openly, to the monarchy. After the fall of Dr Musaddeq, Iran relinquished its quiescent neutralism and was sucked into the US sphere of influence. In the same year Sardar Mohammad Daoud became the Prime Minister of Afghanistan and enunciated his Government's economic and foreign policies. He said that his Government would increase the tempo of economic development, institute national economic planning as the mechanism for guiding development, and maintain a posture of non-alignment as an economic as well as a political objective.²⁸ These divergent positions hampered serious deliberations although two rounds of Irano-Afghan talks took place in Washington (1956) and Tehran (1957). Iran complained that Afghanistan did not recognize its downstream rights. The Afghans were reluctant to settle the problem as they stood to gain by the situation as it then obtained.²⁹ Technically, the problem lingered, but, because of its characteristic nature of not being perennial, it was assigned low priority for many successive years.

The problem cropped up again in 1971, which was an year of unprecedented drought and Afghanistan was unable to give the water required by Iran. During the intervening period, much water had flowed down the Helmand, and a new

²⁶Composed of Canada, Chile, and the United States.

²⁷On 28 February 1951.

²⁸Marvin Brant, "Recent Economic Development", in Louis Dupree and Linette Albert, eds, *Afghanistan in the Seventies* (New York, N. Y., 1974), p. 94.

²⁹Leonard Binder, *Iran* (Berkeley, Calif., 1962), p. 332.

configuration in international relations had appeared. *Detente* was the dominant theme, and a direct, bilateral approach as a means of resolving inter-state problems had gained fairly wide acceptance. Economic factors tended to blunt political edges. All this made its impact on Iran as well as Afghanistan, especially so far as their attitudes towards the settlement of the more-than-100-year-old, though largely dormant, dispute over the Helmand waters was concerned. The novel feature in the search for a solution in the early seventies was that, instead of looking for outside arbitration or mediation, the two disputants sought to reach a settlement through bilateral negotiations, in a spirit of self-reliance.

Thus, the Irano-Afghan parleys on the subject were initiated in June 1972. During the second session of talks in Kabul (September), whereas the Afghans pleaded for the adoption of the Neutral Nations' recommendation as the basis for discussions, the Iranians made out a case for receiving a larger volume of water. What seems to have transformed the bargaining styles of the negotiations was a totally new Iranian stance and Afghan position.

As its economy had tremendously improved, Iran geared itself to promote its political dominance in the region. The process began almost simultaneously with Britain's military withdrawal from the Gulf towards the end of 1971. In terms of the Guam Doctrine of self-reliance, the United States was reluctant to step into the shoes of Britain in the Gulf. Instead, it decided to delegate the task of policing the region to Iran. This was to be sustained by the sale of sophisticated arms to Iran, unprecedented in nature and quantity for that country. While asserting its prime position in the Gulf, Iran was keen to strengthen its fences *vis-a-vis* the Soviet Union. In spite of the Soviet reiteration of its desire for abiding friendship with it, Iran looked askance at the Soviet-Indian and Soviet-Iraqi treaties and attempted to neutralize the perceived Soviet threat by floating the idea of greater and closer co-operation with its other neighbouring and regional states. It not only improved its fences with most of the Arab states but also sought to befriend India and Afghanistan. Pakistan was already dear to Iran. Because of "normalization" of relations between Iran and the Soviet Union during the sixties, the gap that had arisen between Iran and Afghanistan during the fifties narrowed in the seventies. Besides, such specific concerns as controlling smuggling and trans-border migrations and maximizing complementary trade³⁰ and other developments like the dismemberment of Pakistan, the separatist movement in Baluchistan and the festering deterioration in Afghan-Pakistani relations spurred Iran to improve its own relations with Afghanistan.³¹ In the midst of its dispute with Pakistan, Afghanistan appeared more amenable to the idea of possible Iranian mediation. It also seemed anxious to improve bilateral relations further. There was yet another weighty factor behind this Afghan turn towards

³⁰Richard Newell, "Foreign Relations", in Dupree and Albert, n. 28, p. 81.

³¹Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Iran's Search for Regional Cooperation", *Middle East Journal* (Washington, D.C.), spring 1976, p. 180.

Iran, viz the change in the moods of the Soviet Union and the United States in the context of *detente* in general, reflected in Afghanistan in particular. By the early seventies, having finished most of their work in the development projects in Afghanistan, both the Big Powers separately concluded that their aid could be reduced, and it actually dwindled.³² Faced with this problem, the Afghans looked for alternative sources of aid. Iran appeared to be a possible source of aid. On the whole, in the three different sets of bilateral problems—Irano-Soviet, Irano-Afghan, and Pakistani-Afghan—Iran held a pivotal position. From the long-term Soviet strategic point of view, stability in the region and mutual accommodation among three of its southern-flank neighbours, as well as its own individual friendship with all the three, was desirable.

In this international environment in the region, Iran initiated the idea of buying closer relations with Afghanistan, and for the first time it offered financial payment and concessional transit rights for Afghan exports through Bandar Abbas in return for more water by Afghanistan. Being a land-locked country, the Afghan economy was further choked when Pakistan denied transit facilities to Afghan exports. Therefore, the Iranian gesture was quickly grasped by the Afghans. This added a totally new dimension to the erstwhile fluid water problem. Henceforth, Iran and Afghanistan showed magnanimity and flexibility in their respective attitudes, and this constructive factor facilitated the process of bilateral understanding. Yet Iran's move, which was aimed at an objective much wider than the mere volume of water, gave a new perspective to the problem from the Afghan point of view. Although it made the Afghans conciliatory, it also made them covetous and long for a prolongation of the dispute. This could be explained in the following terms. The new Iranian posture had the Afghan good will as its basic objective and gave the upper hand to Afghanistan though much of it was compromised by the decline in American and Soviet aid. Iran's offers of subsidies and concessional transit rights were advantages to Afghanistan which should be made long-term. There was a lurking suspicion that in the event of Afghanistan's finally resolving its problem, Iran might terminate or restrict the nature of its offer. Therefore, in the long-term Afghan national interest, it was imperative to grab the benefit out of the Iranian position and yet keep the problem open. Such a course contained elements of future discord and instability.

In this background, the negotiations continued through the early quarter of 1973. There was an exchange of high-level delegations between Tehran and Kabul through January and February when the draft of the agreement was discussed and agreed upon. Finally, in March 1973, the Prime Minister of Iran travelled to Kabul. The Prime Ministers of the two countries signed the Helmand River Water Treaty on 13 March.³³ The treaty was to come into force on the day of exchange of the instruments of ratification.

³²Newell, n. 30, p. 81.

³³*Kabul Times*, 13 March 1973; and *Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 17 March 1973.

The treaty contained ten Articles: two protocols related to Articles VII and VIII. According to Article I, the volume of water from the Helmand River to be released by Afghanistan in a normal year was restricted to an average flow of 22 cubic metres per second. This was in accordance with the recommendation of the tripartite Neutral Commission. But Article II made an improvement when it specified the volume of water to be received by Iran during each month of the year, ranging from 2.32 cubic metres per second in the dry months to 78.16 cubic metres during the flood period. Article III laid down that in the event of a fall in the flow of water due to climatic factors the volume of water could be reduced on a proportionate basis. Under Article IV, Afghanistan agreed not to take any action which might deprive Iran totally or partially of its agreed share of water, and it retained all rights to the balance of the river water. Iran undertook not to lay claim to the Helmand waters in excess of the specified volume, even if additional water might be available in the Helmand lower delta. Article V obliged Afghanistan to take no action to make the water to be delivered to Iran totally unsuitable for agriculture or to cause it to be polluted. Article VI stipulated that any type of joint structures which were necessary for the purpose of stabilization of the bed of the Helmand River at places where the boundary-line was located at the bed of the river, could be constructed only after the plans and specifications for such structures had been approved by both the parties. Article VII provided that either party could appoint its Commissioners to supervise implementation of the provisions of the Treaty. Article VIII stated that in the event of differences in the interpretation or application of the provisions of the treaty, the parties were first to endeavour to obtain a solution through diplomatic negotiations or use of the good offices of a third party, but if neither course produced a solution, the differences were to be submitted for arbitration. Under Article IX, it was agreed that the treaty represented "the complete and permanent agreement of the two countries, and that it was not to be subjected to any other present or future principle or precedent". Article X envisaged that if, because of extreme drought or *force majeure*, the flow of water to the Helmand delta was made temporarily impossible, the Commissioners of the two countries would enter into immediate consultations with a view to formulating a plan for "minimizing the emergency of their respective governments". The first protocol provided for the constitution, terms of reference, and functions of the Water Commission, and the second contained the agreed details about the manner of resolving the differences and the conditions and composition of the Arbitral Tribunal.

The treaty represented a bilateral and balanced approach to tackle the problem of sharing the water of lower Helmand. It also provided for a built-in mechanism for resolving differences. What in the past decades was regulated only by the uncertain yardstick of tradition and local usage was now given a firm foundation in a formal understanding.³⁴ The fact that Iran ultimately agreed to the release of

³⁴ *Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 17 March 1973.

an average of 22 cusecs of water would indicate that either its insistence on a higher volume was exaggerated or that Iran's new foreign policy posture dictated the subordination of the narrow problem of water to the larger objective of regional dominance.

The signing of the treaty was preceded by a massive publicity effort by the two Governments welcoming it. The Afghan Prime Minister, Mohammad Musa Shafiq, stated: "The agreement we have prepared will solve the Helmand problem. . . . The Afghan government has invariably endeavoured that an agreement on Helmand should be drawn up in such a manner that another 100 years of the two nations are [not] wasted on finding a solution for this difficulty. . . ." Reciprocating the point, the Iranian Prime Minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, concluded that "with the settlement of the Helmand problem, there is no longer any question mark in relations between the two countries".³⁵ By and large, the treaty was hailed in Iran, but there was opposition in Afghanistan right from the negotiating stage. As early as September 1972, a former Prime Minister, Hashim Maiwandwal, denounced the talks as "an undesirable deal to the detriment of the Afghan nation" and "a plot against the people of Afghanistan". Organized political groups such as the Khalq and Parcham continued to voice their opposition to any agreement with Iran on the issue. The basis of the public opposition was a suspicion of Iranian motives in the context of Iran's continued orientation towards the Western bloc. In the early seventies it was believed that Iran's policy moves in the Gulf and the wider region had the blessings of the United States and that Iran exercised latitude well within the limits laid down by Washington.³⁶ In this context, Iran's gestures were construed as palliatives designed to tempt Afghanistan in a subtle way and distort its non-aligned posture.

Since the Afghan nation's attention was focussed on the progress of the debate in the Parliament, the Prime Minister spent an inordinate amount of time explaining the Government's attitude and canvassing support for the ratification of the treaty. In April, the International Affairs Committee as well as the Agricultural Affairs Committee of the House of the People approved of the treaty and recommended it for ratification by the Parliament. On the Iranian side, Foreign Minister Khal'atbari presented the Helmand agreement to the Majlis in the second week of June. He sought to assure the Majlis that "all the misgivings of the past" had been eliminated. He expressed the hope that the Majlis would discuss the agreement in the light of its contribution to the growing ties between the two neighbours. In an unusual move, the Opposition Mardom Party leader, Holaku Rambod, immediately announced his party's basic agreement with the accord.³⁷ The agreement was ratified by the Iranian Majlis on 17 July 1973.³⁸

³⁵*Ravabet-e Khariji-e Iran dar Sal-e 1351 (Wizaret-e Umoor-e Kharjeh)*, p. 26.

³⁶Mohammed Ayoob, "Indo-Iranian Relations: Strategic, Political, and Economic Dimensions", *India Quarterly* (New Delhi), January-March 1977, p. 4.

³⁷*Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 16 June 1973.

³⁸*The Echo of Iran* (Tehran), 18 July 1973, p. 1.

This process was interrupted by the Republican revolution in Afghanistan on the same day. In the following month, although President Daoud reiterated that the new Government would abide by its "fairly concluded international treaties", the choice of the key words could indicate ominous implications for the Helmand River Waters Treaty. Even though Daoud expressed his desire to preserve and strengthen Afghanistan's friendly relations with all its neighbours, including Iran, the Iranians entertained doubt about the new Afghan Government ratifying the treaty. This apprehension was born of the delay in ratification which the Afghans ascribed to their preoccupation with their internal problems. It seems that the Republican Government grasped the essence of its predecessor's policy of expectations from Iran, and opposition to the treaty by certain segments of population came in handy for withholding ratification, thereby keeping the problem open.

Towards the close of the year 1973, while Afghanistan held up ratification, a serious clash occurred in October at the Irano-Afghan border in Sistan. The incident was the culmination of the conflicting claims made regarding a portion of the no-man's land of some 600 square metres in an area which emerged after the Helmand had changed its course. The situation was tense and fluid, but further aggravation was halted as both the Governments exercised restraint. In the absence of an authentic assessment, the clash may be taken to indicate that the two sides might, in the event of their extra-riparian interests not materializing according to their respective expectations, use force to secure a favourable settlement of the dispute.

The border incident provided a practical test of the bilateral understanding reached in March. It was significant that no follow-up action was taken as provided for in Articles VII and VIII. This was because, in the absence of ratification,³⁹ the relevant treaty was infructuous. The Shah expressed a broad view that Iran would not "press" even if Afghanistan did not ratify the treaty.⁴⁰ The assumption about the divergent attitudes of Iran and Afghanistan towards a settlement of the problem during the parleys in 1972-73 may be recapitulated as subsequent events confirmed it more and more. Iran saw the Afghan game and yet decided to go ahead with its basic objective of weaving closer friendship with Afghanistan. In the larger perspective wherein there arose a complementarity of interests, the water problem lost much of its substance on both sides. That explains Afghanistan's keenness to attract Iranian aid and Iran's studied magnanimity towards the Afghan posture.

³⁹The treaty was eventually ratified by Afghanistan as well, and the instruments of ratification were exchanged in Tehran on 5 June 1977 between the Iranian Foreign Minister and the Afghan Ambassador.

⁴⁰In an interview to an Indian journalist, R.K. Karanjia, on 12 March 1974, the Shah said: "It is we who have really given all the advantages to them [Afghans], but if they don't want to finalize the agreement, we won't press for it. And we won't adopt any inimical position." *Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 6 April 1974.

Comprehending Iran's basic interest and anxiety, Afghanistan sought to secure deeper and wider Iranian financial involvement in its own development process. Iran had initiated its financial diplomacy, and now there ensued a functionalist approach towards the objective of winning further friends and influencing more people in Afghanistan. This was reflected in the series of financial aid, commercial, economic, and technical co-operation agreements signed between Iran and Afghanistan. The spirit was sustained by frequent exchange of high-level visits.

In October 1974 Iran extended a grant of \$10 million to Afghanistan in order to finance feasibility studies on a large number of projected joint ventures and development projects.⁴¹ At this time, the Iranian Minister of Economy and Finance, Hushang Ansary, gave a broad hint about the nature and conditions of Iranian aid. Describing the agreement as "only the beginning of extended economic co-operation", he suggested that further Iranian assistance to Afghanistan "would be forthcoming on the basis of feasibility studies and future agreement by the two countries".⁴² During President Daoud's visit to Iran (April-May 1975), under a memorandum of understanding, Iran agreed to lend \$700 million on easy terms to finance specific projects for paper, sugar, cement, textiles, and wool development in the lower Helmand basin and completion of the second part of the Yakhchal-Dehshu road and its extension to the Iranian border. Iran also agreed to provide a credit of \$10 million for the establishment of an Afghan export bank and \$2.5 million for equipping a flight information centre.⁴³

In terms of the development perspective and abiding political relations, trade is more vital than aid. It was notable that already there was a trend towards the development of Irano-Afghan trade. In 1973 the volume of Iran's non-oil exports to Afghanistan touched the figure of 507 million rials, whereas the figure for 1963 was only 36 million rials. For the same years Iran's imports from Afghanistan increased from 16 million to 69 million rials.⁴⁴ The objective of a commercial agreement which was signed in February 1974 was to provide each country increased access to the other's commodities. Valid for one year, and renewable afterwards it specified the Irano-Afghan trade exchanges in accordance with the development status of the two nations so as to ensure maximum profit to both.⁴⁵

Along with an increase in trade, there were moves towards fostering technical and economic co-operation. During Sardar Mohammad Naim's visit to Tehran (May 1974) an agreement in principle was reached to promote technical and economic co-operation between the two countries. The Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, Wahid Abdullah, stated that the long-discussed transit route for Afghan trade through Bandar Abbas and overland across Iran was "nearer realization".

⁴¹The agreement was signed in Tehran.

⁴²*Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 25 October 1974.

⁴³*Middle East Economic Digest* (London), 9 May 1975, p. 10.

⁴⁴*Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 23 February 1974.

⁴⁵*Middle East Economic Digest*, 22 February 1974, p. 207.

The five-year agreement on transit was signed in Kabul early in September.⁴⁶ In August, the two countries reached an accord to co-operate in the large-scale development programme in the "joint region of the Helmand River". Iran was to provide Afghanistan with \$10 million for feasibility studies for a number of projects, including a scheme for the development of the Helmand Valley, construction of dams for electricity generation and the development of irrigation, and a wide range of industrial and agricultural projects. The transit route Iran had offered to Afghanistan through Bandar Abbas and Zabol would be completed and linked to the Afghan road network, and Iran would assist the Afghans in completing their half of the highway.⁴⁷ In October 1975, under a technical co-operation agreement, Iran lent \$10 million to Afghanistan for undertaking extensive economic surveys and construction projects. The two countries agreed to implement joint ventures in agriculture and farming.⁴⁸ Under yet another agreement in June 1976 Iran undertook to send consulting engineers to map out development projects for the Afghan Government and to help develop agriculture in Afghanistan. Iran could be a long-term purchaser of Afghan agricultural products. It could, in its turn, export industrial goods to Afghanistan.⁴⁹

The spirit of mutual understanding at the political level was simultaneously nurtured by exchange of high-level visits. The more notable of such visits were those paid by Afghan dignitaries to Iran. In his first official visit to Iran (January 1974) after the revolution in Afghanistan, the Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, Wahid Abdullah, stated that the objective of the new regime was to make his country's relations with Iran stronger than they had been during the previous regime. He said that in the interest of its own economic and social development, Afghanistan was keen to learn from Iran's experience and knowhow.⁵⁰ Next, in the ascending hierarchical order, was the visit of Sardar Mohammad Naim, President Daoud's brother and special envoy, in May 1974. He led a delegation which included Wahid Abdullah as well as certain high officials of the Ministries of Economy and Education. The two countries were expected to move closer after an agreement, in principle, was signed during this visit to promote bilateral economic and technical co-operation. In a statement on the occasion Wahid Abdullah said that he foresaw "large-scale" Iranian participation in Afghanistan's current

⁴⁶Under its terms, Afghanistan not only gained access to the Persian Gulf, it could also use all Iranian roads, railways, and ports to transport and ship its merchandise to Europe. Iranian railways were to transport Afghan goods at a discount of 20 per cent. In return, Iran could send its goods to Pakistan through Afghan road and railway network. *Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 14 September 1974.

⁴⁷The protocol was signed in Kabul. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 2 August 1974, p. 878; and *ibid.*, 1 November 1974, p. 1308.

⁴⁸*Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 25 October 1975.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 6 June 1976. See also *Middle East Economic Digest*, 4 June 1976, p. 11.

⁵⁰*Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 2 February 1974.

development plan. Interestingly enough, he described the Helmand River waters issue as “unimportant” in comparison with the scale of the anticipated co-operation between the two countries. According to him, the Helmand River problem did not arise during the talks. Observers believed that the Helmand River question was not at issue between the two countries at this time.⁵¹

The high-water mark in Irano-Afghan friendship was reached when President Daoud paid a visit to Iran in April-May 1975. On this occasion, while the Shah cited the “present, broad-based” economic and trade co-operation against a background of deep-seated and time-honoured historical, religious, and ethnic ties, the President was forthright in stating that Iran and Afghanistan were “duty-bound” to expand their co-operation. He also hoped that the bilateral talks would lead to “a new phase in our friendly relations”. In the joint communique issued after the talks, the two heads of state condemned, *inter alia*, the use of force in international relations and praised the new international movement for solution of differences through bilateral negotiations. These two points had a direct bearing on the still-unresolved Helmand dispute. President Daoud lauded the Shah’s proposal for a better international economic system and closer economic co-operation among the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. He said that Afghanistan attached the highest importance to co-operation with Iran. Both expressed satisfaction over the expanding commercial, economic, and technical relations between their two countries.⁵²

A review of the recently promoted Irano-Afghan techno-economic-commercial *rapprochement* would reveal that it has not proceeded along the path of bilateral economic complementarity. It is mostly a one-way process in which, financially and otherwise, Afghanistan has been at the receiving end, and the balance of trade is in Iran’s favour. Moreover, most of Iran’s financial aid is in the form of loans rather than outright grants. These factors create a complex and delicate position and generate negative national attitudes. Whereas the Afghans might feel that the quantum of Iranian aid falls below their expectations, the Iranians have tagged their aid to the degree of understanding between the two Governments. This aid has mostly been given for development projects in the Helmand basin. A positive aspect is that both countries have markets for certain specific goods of the one in the other. This may lead to interdependence in certain limited fields, thus creating economic compulsions for further political harmony. Being relatively developed and well set on the path of industrialization, Iran gets an opportunity of testing its technical skill and capability in the agreed joint

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 18 May 1974. While noting the substance of Abdullah’s statement, another source ascribes it to the “Iranian spokesman”. This may add to the degree of *rapprochement*. *Middle East Economic Digest*, 24 May 1974, p. 596.

⁵²*Kayhan* (weekly international edn), 3 May 1975.

ventures, which, however, are still at the embryonic stage.

Iran's financial diplomacy does not seem to have made much of a dent in the foreign-policy orientation of Afghanistan so far as the core of Iran's expectations is concerned. Iran might claim credit for a softening of the Afghan attitude towards such specific issues as the Pakistani-Afghan tensions and the Baluch insurgency. It has also succeeded in eliciting the support of the new Republican Government of Afghanistan for its position on the Gulf, viz that the security of the Gulf region should be maintained through co-operation among the littoral states and without foreign interference. Yet Afghanistan does not entirely share the perceptions of Iran about the threat to, and the security plan for, the Gulf. Afghanistan is equally wary about the Iranian proposal for the expansion of the Regional Co-operation for Development (RCD) membership or for an economic grouping of the northern littoral states of the Indian Ocean. The traditional suspicions seem to be lurking. In the absence of complete mutual trust and faith, the current phase of cordiality may fade away, and the latent motivations and expectations as regards Iranian aid might break open. If the true objective of the Afghan approach is only to deepen the Iranian financial involvement without a corresponding political *quid pro quo*, Iran might eventually call the bluff as it realizes Afghanistan's financial predicament.

To sum up and conclude, it may be stated that the dispute over the Helmand River waters was the only outstanding problem between Iran and Afghanistan. Even though an inter-Governmental agreement was finally reached in March 1973, the dispute was not legally resolved till June 1977, when the instruments of ratification were exchanged. By its nature the dispute was not perennial as it cropped up only during the years of drought and in the dry season. Iran, being the lower riparian state, always felt the pinch and took the initiative in seeking a solution. Except for some instances of threat of military action, both the countries, by and large, devoted themselves to finding a political solution. That ranged from arbitration and mediation to bilateral negotiations. For inexplicable reasons, Iran never referred its dispute for adjudication. Nor did it, at any time, specify its needs in specific volume. Since the provincial area, till recently, did not attract the serious attention of the Central Government in terms of development, the problem did not receive due priority. That is probably why the problem did not acquire serious and menacing proportions. Interestingly the problem has acquired a relative degree of continuity since the early seventies. This is because of a coalescence of the Iranian Government's resolve to develop this area and its wider political interest in the region. In this perspective, Iran made a different type of approach to Afghanistan. The functionalist style of diplomacy evoked positive response from Afghanistan, and the two Governments agreed on bilateral co-operation on a number of projects. Theoretically, the spill-over capacity of such projects is expected to create economic interdependence and political harmony, which is a desideratum for regional stability. It is rather too early to assess how far the economic and technical *rapprochement* has been altruistic

and how far it has eroded the traditional political fears and suspicions which lie beneath the current phase of reiterated friendship and co-operation. This is a serious limitation, and along with the difference in the core of the foreign policies of Iran and Afghanistan, the Helmand River waters problem could cause bilateral tension and regional instability.

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