Iranian Investment Partly Politically Driven

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Tajikistan and Iran have agreed to strengthen economic cooperation even further, a move NBCentralAsia analysts say could help prevent Tehran from becoming completely isolated in the region.

During a visit to Tehran on May 8-9, President Imomali Rahmon secured a pledge of Iranian investment to build another hydroelectric power station on the Vakhsh river, and start work on the four-kilometre Chormagzak tunnel in the mountains east of Dushanbe.

Iran has also promised to speed up construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric station, which began last year as well stepping up the pace on laying a high-voltage electricity transmission line and a new road and rail link from Tajikistan to Iran via Afghanistan.

Commentators say the two countries reap different benefits from their cooperation. Investing in Tajikistan helps insure Iran against political and economic isolation, while Tajikistan gets a boost to its economy.

Political scientist Khodi Abdujabbor says it is Tajikistan that is pushing for a closer relationship, but Tehran still stands to gain by forging close ties with neighbouring states as the West piles on the pressure over its nuclear programme.

Another analyst, Parviz Mullojanov, says Iran is also is trying to block the United States’ influence in the region, or at least limit its growth, by strengthening its own position in Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries.

“This is now one of the most crucial tasks facing Iran, because if the US consolidates [its position] in the region, Iran will find itself completely isolated. Even now it is surrounded almost completely by satellite states and allies of the US,” he said.

Iran also stands to gain economically as it lobbies for cross-border projects that are to its own benefit. But NBCentralAsia observers point out that Afghanistan, which lies between the two countries, is an obstacle to more ambitious ventures.

The European Union’s ambassador to Afghanistan, Hansjoerg Kretschmer, says that even though northern Afghanistan is more stable than the south, it is still impossible to get large economic projects off the ground due to the high levels of security and investment needed.

But Mullojanov thinks Iran will do all it can to undertake joint projects with Afghanistan so as to pull it away from US influence.

“Iran is interested in working on transit projects because they could help reduce US influence on both Afghan and Central Asian leaders,” he said.
(News Briefing Central Asia draws comment and analysis from a broad range of political observers across the region.)

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