U.S., Iran Might Become Allies Soon If War Is Declared Against Taliban
By Daniel Pearl

If the U.S. declares war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, it may find itself in an unspoken and unofficial alliance with its old nemesis, Iran.

Iran has deplored the Taliban longer than the U.S. has but not because the fundamentalist government is harboring alleged terrorist Osama bin Laden. In addition to longstanding friction with Afghanistan's ethnic Pushtuns who control the Taliban, Iran is angry over the regime's brutal treatment of its own Shiite population and its past encouragement of drug trafficking into Iran.

"We would enjoy if the Taliban is removed and a stable government is replaced," a Tehran intellectual, who didn’t want to be named, said Sunday. He and many other Iranians accuse the Taliban of sullying the name of Islam.

See full coverage of the terrorist attack.

But whether Iran could take advantage of an assault on the Taliban is less certain.

Iran has long played a role in Afghanistan, projecting its influence through the northern minorities Hazara Shiites and Uzbeks. Starting after Soviet troops left in 1989, it became extremely active, opening consulates in northern Mazar-i-Sharif and western Heart. The Taliban's crushing of much of the northerners in the last three years has seriously reduced Tehran's influence. Today, along with the U.S. and Russia, it is a key ally of the ethnic Tajik forces of Ahmad Shah Massoud, whose men control pockets in northern and northeastern Afghanistan and are the Taliban's only remaining significant resistance.

Last Sunday, though, two suicide bombers posing as journalists detonated a bomb concealed in their video camera killing Mr. Massoud. He leaves behind no unifying successor around whom the opposition could be galvanized. Hence, Afghanistan could end up with a destabilizing vacuum, with both sides weakened but no one able to take charge. If anyone, Pakistan would probably gain in such a vacuum, because of its ethnic ties to the Afghan Pushtuns.

Without Mr. Massoud, Iran lacks a strong surrogate through whom it can project its influence. After a long period as a strongman, Uzbek leader Rashid Dostum was discredited by being forced to flee twice ahead of advancing Taliban troops. The Hazaras are crushed. Also, even if the U.S. did cripple the Taliban in a bombing campaign, Iran is physically separated from the sections of Afghanistan where it exerts influence, and so would have trouble taking advantage immediately of any power vacuum.

The U.S., of course, also faces logistical hurdles in contemplating any attack on Afghanistan that would go beyond the launching of cruise missiles. Despite their firepower, Soviet troops became bogged down during the 1980s and finally withdrew, defeated.
Iran does have one serious score to settle with the Taliban -- the 1998 murder of nine Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan, for which the Taliban never accepted responsibility. During its heated verbal exchange with Afghanistan at the time, Iran performed large military exercises on its Afghan border but stopped short of more serious action.

And even if it merely maintains silence, Iran could make a potential attack on the Taliban easier for the U.S. and its allies to carry out, by defusing criticism within the Islamic world. The Iranian press so far has been silent on the possibility of U.S. retaliation against Afghanistan. Official statements have expressed sympathy for the U.S. after Tuesday's devastating attack on New York and Washington, though at least one Iranian commentator constructed a conspiracy theory blaming Zionists.