

# IS A REGIONAL STRATEGY VIABLE IN AFGHANISTAN?



Ashley J. **Tellis**  
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Editors

Introduction by  
Jessica T. **Mathews**

## CONTRIBUTORS

Christopher **Boucek** on **Saudi Arabia**

Gilles **Dorransoro** on the **Coalition**

Frédéric **Grare** on **Pakistan**

Haroun **Mir** on **Afghanistan**

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*Jessica T. Mathews*

The Obama administration has made some decisive changes to the Afghan policy it inherited. Most significantly, in its first year it committed to a 250 percent increase in the American force on the ground (adding 51,000 troops to the 34,000 in Afghanistan when Mr. Obama took office) and lobbied hard to secure increases in non-U.S. coalition forces. It matched this large increase in force with a major reduction in the goal: from raising a democratic state in Afghanistan to the creation of a state strong enough to prevent a takeover by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, or any other radical Islamic group; and to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat” al-Qaeda (which, of course, is not achievable in Afghanistan or Afghanistan and Pakistan alone). The third pillar of the policy was and is a greater emphasis on the need for a regional approach, a belief the Bush administration moved toward in its closing days.

It has never been clear, however, exactly what a “regional approach” might mean in practice. The phrase can mean the strictly military necessity of eliminating the sanctuary afforded to al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other enemy forces across the border in Pakistan. Or, it can mean something as ambitious as a political, military, and economic

collaboration among the coalition partners and more than half a dozen regional states, based on the premise that they all share a common interest in the stability of Afghanistan, and the elimination of a state home for radicals with a regional or global agenda and income from narcotics traffic. In between lies a version that seeks to treat Pakistan and Afghanistan as virtually a single entity both tactically and politically, and with respect to long-term economic and social development.

The new administration's shift to a regional approach began immediately. The *Washington Post* reported as early as November 11, 2008 that "At [Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael] Mullen's direction, the map of the Afghanistan battle space is being redrawn to include the tribal regions of western Pakistan."<sup>1</sup> Because American troops were not allowed to cross the border, the tools that had to be employed in Pakistan—standoff weaponry, special forces, and covert operations—differed, but in light of the enhanced military effort in Afghanistan, the need for tight coordination between operations on either side of the porous border was self-evident. As U.S. National Security Adviser General James Jones later put it, "we have several countries, but we have one theater."<sup>2</sup>

The administration expanded the linkage into the political sphere with the introduction of the concept of "AfPak." Though Pakistan, with its conviction that India poses the real existential threat, would have argued that the invented entity should have been "AfPakIn," India's unyielding opposition prevented its inclusion in this scheme. Moreover, by the time of the administration's second strategic review of the war late in 2009, it had become clear that Pakistan had to be approached not simply as an instrument for achieving U.S. aims in Afghanistan, but at least as an equal priority—"PakAf," in effect. Eventually the term was dropped because of its grating effect in Islamabad, but the conviction remains that success cannot be achieved in Afghanistan—even by the administration's limited definition of success—without Pakistan's cooperation.

A full-blown version of the regional strategy was also articulated as early as the pre-inauguration transition period. In the words of General David Petraeus, Commander of U.S. Central Command:

It's not possible to resolve the challenges internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges especially in terms of security related to Afghanistan's neighbors. A regional approach is required.... [The Coalition] will have to develop and execute a regional strategy that includes Pakistan, India, the Central Asian States and even China and Russia along with perhaps at some point Iran.<sup>3</sup>

The question that has never been carefully explored, however, is whether these states—and in our view the list must include Saudi Arabia—in fact share the interests that have been posited. Is there a reality behind the hope that regional cooperation is the avenue to success in Afghanistan? Do these key states see their own interests in regard to counterterrorism, governance in Afghanistan, and longer term reconstruction and economic development in such a way that a working consensus among them could in fact be constructed?

To answer this we asked seven noted Carnegie experts—Frédéric Grare (Pakistan), Gautam Mukhopadhaya (India), Karim Sadjadpour (Iran), Martha Brill Olcott (Central Asian Republics), Christopher Boucek (Saudi Arabia), Michael Swaine (China), and Dmitri Trenin (Russia)—to address the following questions in his or her own area of expertise:

- What are the country's real and perceived interests in Afghanistan, and what are its aims regarding coalition political-military activities in Afghanistan?
- What policies does that country (or in the case of Central Asia, group of countries) follow to advance these interests?
- What is the impact of these policies on achieving stability in Afghanistan?
- How do this country's interests and policies intersect with those of others? Who are the relevant "others" for the country in question?



- If competitive, can the interests and policies be reconciled? If so, how, and on what terms?

Two additional papers fill out the analysis. A paper by Haroun Mir, written from Kabul, reverses the lens, asking how the national government and other powerful political actors in Afghanistan see a possible regional approach. How do they assess the interests and actions of this same group of neighboring states and do they see them as compatible with Afghanistan's core national objectives? From Kabul's point of view, what would the international community have to get right for a regional approach to succeed in Afghanistan?

Carnegie's Gilles Dorronsoro examines the same issues from the point of view of key troop-contributing coalition partners. How do they assess the value of a regional approach, what would such an approach ideally consist of, and, crucially, how do these partners assess the objectives and actions of the neighboring states of interest? What policy instruments do the coalition partners possess to induce change on the part of Afghanistan's neighbors?

In a final paper, Ashley Tellis presents his synthesis of the multiple interests of the regional states and their implications for U.S. policy.

In a nutshell, the analyses offered in this report lead to the conclusion that the wider forms of regional cooperation that are in principle desirable to foster stability and development in Afghanistan and deny safe haven to al-Qaeda and other terrorist actors will in practice be unattainable. This conclusion emerges inductively from the papers.

That said, the richness of the analysis of each regional actor (or collection of actors in the case of coalition partners) has a more far-reaching value. All the relevant states will continue to act in and around Afghanistan, pursuing their national interests as they see them. Whatever succession of strategies the United States and its partners adopt in the years ahead in pursuit of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, a deep and nuanced understanding of the interests and policies of the neighboring states—not as the United States would like them to be, but as these states actually perceive them—will be essential to a successful outcome.

## NOTES

- 1 Karen DeYoung, “Obama to Explore New Approach in Afghanistan War,” *Washington Post*, November 11, 2008.
- 2 James Jones, “Press Briefing by National Security Advisor General James Jones on the President’s Meetings With President Karzai of Afghanistan and President Zardari of Pakistan,” Office of the Press Secretary, White House, May 6, 2009.
- 3 General David Petraeus, “Remarks,” Passing the Baton Conference, Walter E. Washington Convention Center, Washington, D.C., hosted by the United States Institute of Peace, January 8, 2010.





*Haroun Mir*

Since its inception in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani, Afghanistan has become the subject of direct influence of both regional and world powers. From 1919, when the country gained full sovereignty from the British Empire, up until the communist coup in 1978 (followed by the 1979 invasion by the Soviet Union), Afghanistan enjoyed a relatively peaceful period. The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the fall of the communist regime in 1992 marked the beginning of the end of Afghanistan as a reliable state. The vacuum created by the world powers was immediately filled by the ambitions of regional countries, which led to the collapse of the Afghan central government and onset of civil war.

From 1992 until the removal of the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan had been a site for proxy war between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on one side, and Iran, India, and Russia on the other. International consensus on the need to fight and defeat international terrorism in 2001 renewed hope for Afghans. However, the failure of the international community to stabilize the country and recent speculation of an eventual withdrawal of international security forces has led to renewed debate about the re-regionalization of the Afghan conflict.

## THE VALUE OF A REGIONAL APPROACH

Afghan national objectives include achieving internal stability, maintaining friendly relations with neighboring and regional countries, and acting as a trade and transit hub linking South and Central Asia as well as China with Iran and the rest of the Middle East.

Afghanistan is a poor, landlocked country, and thus it believes that a regional approach will help it achieve its national objectives. Afghanistan is economically dependent on its neighbors, as the bulk of its trade is with neighboring and regional countries. In addition, over the past decades, Pakistan and Iran have become home to millions of Afghan refugees, and the return of these Afghans from exile will pose enormous economic, social, and security challenges for the Afghan government. Meanwhile, a number of young Afghans educated in these regional countries can play an important role in the reconstruction and development of their homeland.

Indeed, without the cooperation of Afghanistan's neighbors, the prospect of peace and stability in the country seems remote. Afghan people are fully aware of the destructive capacity of Afghanistan's neighbors, which was proven over the past three decades. Thus, they believe that a regional agreement on Afghanistan is the key solution for the ongoing conflict in the country.

Given the challenging situation in the country, Afghanistan's efforts to achieve security and stability through consultations with regional countries will doubtless face countless obstacles. Nevertheless, a stable Afghanistan must be in the interest of the region as it can play an indispensable role when it comes to achieving regional prosperity through increased trade and transit.

## AN IDEAL REGIONAL APPROACH

An ideal regional approach must explore common opportunities rather than dwell on differences. There will be some impediments to the process, however. Some of the objectives of Afghanistan's neighbors and other regional countries conflict with one another, and have contributed

to instability. These include, but are not limited to, India and Pakistan's struggle over Kashmir, and Russia and the Central Asian Republics' discord over Moscow's desired sphere of influence. A number of regional issues are interlinked, and fully resolving them requires multilateral agreements. Thus, ideal cooperation between Afghanistan and the region depends on the degree to which regional issues such as the Kashmir problem can be resolved.

In addition, numerous issues between Afghanistan and its neighbors remain unresolved. Some of these include border disputes and water sharing disagreements, and existing political and security challenges in Afghanistan complicate the possibility of successful bilateral and multilateral agreements.

Most of the current issues and disputes in the region date back to the British and Russian colonial era. The U.S. administration will face further challenges and difficulties in engaging the countries of the region because some of them see the United States as a belligerent force. However, if the United States is truly committed to effectively advancing regional cooperation, the more practical approach should focus on exploring opportunities rather than trying to fix what countries of the region have not been able to achieve themselves.

There are common opportunities that remain untapped. Afghanistan is an integral part of South and Central Asia and the Greater Middle East, and could play a central role at the crossroads of the three regions. Thus, regional cooperation can serve to benefit all countries of the region. Many of these countries have come to realize that the existing challenges can only be overcome with effective cooperation at the regional level. This new perception has further enhanced the role of regional bodies such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Economic Cooperation Organization, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. However, because of political timidity and unresolved issues among the regional countries, these multilateral institutions have remained ineffective.

Important components of the ideal regional approach should include economic cooperation and free trade and transit by reviving the old Silk Road. Key regional projects, such as the ones aimed at energy

and electricity transportation from Central Asia to Pakistan and India, can contribute to the development of the region.

Similarly, the construction of railroads and highways linking South Asia to Central Asia, as well as China to Iran, would be another beneficial regional economic project. So too would reaching an agreement over a common water management mechanism, which is crucial for building confidence among Afghanistan's neighbors, as Afghanistan's snow-covered mountains are a major source of water for Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

Afghanistan's long-abandoned underground mineral resources have also emerged as an important area for regional cooperation. For instance, the recent contract between Afghanistan and China for exploitation of the copper mine near Kabul has created economic stakes for China in Afghanistan. Opportunities for China or other regional countries such as Kazakhstan to win mining contracts in Afghanistan are greater than ever before. In this way, foreign direct investment from countries in the region has led to new opportunities for cooperation in Afghanistan, and should be further pursued.

In addition, common objectives such as combating terrorism, narcotics, organized crime, and illegal weapons trafficking have led to new incentives for regional cooperation. The rise of terrorism, extremism, and militancy throughout the region, including in China, is a major threat to all regional countries, and the need for a regional mechanism to fight this new phenomenon could serve as a new opportunity for cooperation. It is highly important to convince the relevant players that fighting terrorism and radical groups should not be left to the Western countries and India alone. Intelligence-sharing and joint law enforcement efforts for combating terrorism, narcotics, organized crime, and weapons trafficking might become an essential component of effective regional cooperation.

The success of a regional approach could be judged on its confidence-building ability. For instance, Afghanistan and Pakistan are negotiating a Trade and Transit Agreement, which is beneficial for creating economic and development opportunities along both sides of

the conflict-prone Afghan–Pakistani border. Similarly, bilateral agreements between Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan for supplying Afghan cities with electricity are making new, small steps in this direction.

Nevertheless, despite the breadth of such opportunities, lack of political will, among many other factors, has complicated the prospects for effective regional cooperation. The countries have yet to look beyond historical differences and open a new chapter of cooperation and collaboration for the benefit of their peoples. Given the current dire political situation in Afghanistan, and growing rivalry among regional countries, it is doubtful that the U.S. administration would be able to achieve what seems unrealistic for the time being.

## RELEVANT PLAYERS

### **Pakistan**

Of all the countries in the region, only Pakistan has had a major and contentious territorial dispute with Afghanistan. In fact, the long border between Afghanistan and Pakistan has never been officially ratified by the two countries. This open question is at the root of Pakistan's destabilization of Afghanistan. In addition, Pakistani authorities believe their country is squeezed between two hostile neighbors: India and Afghanistan. The growing enmity between Pakistan and India, and consecutive wars fought between the two countries created paranoia among Pakistan's military and civilian leadership over an Afghan–Indian alliance against Pakistan. After losing the largest chunk of their territory to a separate Bengali state in 1971 (Bangladesh), Pakistani leaders fear a similar dismembering with the Balochs in the West and Pashtuns in the Northwest Frontier Province. Nevertheless, Pakistan has a great stake in a stable Afghanistan, as stability would enable Pakistan's goods to reach Central Asian markets. Pakistan could also benefit from the considerable sources of energy and electricity.



## **India**

Afghanistan and India have always enjoyed fruitful and constructive relations. History has seen India's sustained support of the central Afghan government during challenging circumstances. The only time India opposed the regime in Kabul was during the Taliban era, when that regime adopted a hostile policy toward New Delhi. Pakistan is not the only country that would benefit from a secure Afghanistan. India has a shared interest in a peaceful Afghanistan, as it also seeks increased access for its goods to Central Asian markets. India can further benefit from access to electricity and energy supply.

## **Iran**

Bordering Afghanistan from the West, Iran is another regional country that has historically enjoyed political and economic leverage over Afghanistan. Iran's Afghan policy over the past three decades has been founded on its geostrategic interest, and a key objective of this policy is the expansion of Iranian influence in the region through an increased Shi'i role in Afghanistan. Unlike Pakistan, Iran does not have any territorial disputes with Afghanistan; however, the unresolved dispute over access to water from Afghanistan could prove to be a source of tension and cause for future conflict between the two countries.

Iran is Afghanistan's only neighbor fearful of U.S. military dominance in the region and openly expresses its opposition to the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. In the same vein, Iran has real concerns over any return to power by a radical Sunni movement such as the Taliban. Despite existing cordial Afghanistan–Iran relations, the government of Iran sees Afghanistan as a viable competitor in serving as the Central Asian countries' bridge to the rest of the world.

## **Central Asian Republics**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian Republics have had a common interest in Afghanistan: preventing the rise of militancy and extremism, and the cross-border infiltration of such groups

into their territories. Stability in Afghanistan would quell the serious threat these radical groups pose. The presence of U.S. military bases in Central Asia, as well as NATO's recent decision to use Russia and the Central Asian Republics as a supply route, offers the Central Asian Republics important financial and economic incentives. Since the Central Asian Republics are all landlocked and depend on Russia for access to world markets, a stable Afghanistan could serve as an alternative, cost efficient point of access via Pakistan.

The unresolved issue of water sharing between Afghanistan and a number of these countries might become a potential source of tension, as climate change and frequent droughts are making water scarcer in the region. Another factor is the role of Russia, which is unwilling to abandon its influence over the Central Asian states for various economic and strategic reasons. Therefore, the fulfillment of Central Asian states' objectives in Afghanistan is contingent upon Russia's desire for regional influence.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Since the end of the Cold War, Saudi policy in Afghanistan has shifted from defeating communist ideology to containing Iranian influence in South Asia and the newly liberated Central Asian Republics. Believing radical Sunni Islam to be a natural obstacle to the propagation of a revolutionary Shi'i doctrine in the region, the Saudis invested heavily in radical madrassas in Pakistan, where a considerable number of Afghan and Pakistani youths sought religious education. In addition, the Saudi government funded several mujahideen parties, which agreed to promote their Wahhabi brand of Islam in Afghanistan. Due to lack of knowledge and physical presence in Afghanistan, the Saudis relied mainly on the Pakistani military for the delivery of aid to a select number of Afghan radical groups. The Saudis believed these groups could play an influential role in countering Iranian influence in Afghanistan, and have thus had no qualms offering financial support to extremist groups in Afghanistan and the region. It is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia was among three countries that officially recognized the Taliban regime in 1996.

Saudi Arabia's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction seems nonexistent when compared to that of other countries. The people of Afghanistan expected the Saudi government to make enormous financial contributions toward enhancing social and economic development in the country. The same goes for the Organization of the Islamic Conference, whose mission is to consolidate relations among Islamic countries and find viable solutions for challenges facing the Islamic world.

### **China**

Until recently, China was a passive player in Afghanistan, and exclusively supported Pakistan's policy there, owing to its close alliance with the country. However, Chinese policies toward Afghanistan are shifting for two reasons. First, the Chinese have growing economic interests in Afghanistan's underground mineral resources. Second, they see Afghanistan as important for maintaining their own internal security. The past few years in China have seen the growing influence of extremist and separatist groups such as the Uighur movement, which enjoys inspirational and other support from radical groups, including al-Qaeda and the Taliban. A number of Uighurs who received paramilitary training and were radicalized in the Pakistani training camps pose a growing threat to the stability of Xinjiang province in China.

Nevertheless, for the most part, China's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and development has been limited and passive, similar to that of Saudi Arabia.

### **Russia**

Russia is again asserting itself in the region, and its objectives are closely linked to its national interests in Central Asia. Russia has never abandoned its strategic interest in Central Asia and it is believed to be the sole protector of Central Asian Republics against foreign threats such as radical Islamist movements, including al-Qaeda. Thus, the presence of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan is of serious concern

for the Russian government, as it nullifies its influence in the region. This concern was substantiated by Ambassador Zamir Kabulov (the Russian ambassador in Kabul), who noted that the expansion and modernization of Afghan military bases such as the Bagram air base (north of Kabul) is worrisome for Russia, as it might signal a long-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

## RECONCILING DIFFERENCES

It is clear that many of the regional states' objectives contradict Afghanistan's national goals, which include achieving internal peace, security, and economic empowerment. These goals can be attained through strengthening government institutions like the Afghan security apparatus to enable Afghan forces to effectively defend their country against domestic and external threats.

The countries of the region must re-evaluate their interests in Afghanistan, embracing those that can be considered legitimate, and abandoning those that are destabilizing and illegitimate. For instance, it is legitimate for Pakistan to expect a friendly government in Kabul that does not allow the use of Afghan territory against its interests, but it is illegitimate for Pakistan to impose a puppet government in Kabul as was the case with the Taliban. In the same vein, other countries have similarly dichotomous interests in Afghanistan. Only through a regional agreement will it be possible to reach a consensus over their legitimate interests.

## FOR SUCCESS

The U.S. military presence and the subsequent deployment of more than 30,000 extra troops in Afghanistan have altered the dynamics of the region. As the sole superpower, the United States expected and received the support of all regional countries in its war against terrorism and, as such, has unprecedented leverage in the region. However, nine

years into its engagement in Afghanistan, the situation remains dire. Terrorism is on the rise, and other challenges such as narcotics trafficking and production, and organized crime remain a harsh reality.

A shift of policy from unilateralism toward regional cooperation is a precondition for a successful counterterrorism strategy and achieving a peaceful and stable Afghanistan and region. The United States, therefore, could potentially be a key facilitator of strengthened regional cooperation for peace and security in the region.

However, since regional issues related to Afghanistan are interlinked with many other regional disagreements, the international community, including the U.S. government, will not be able to tackle all of them at once. If the Obama administration decides to move forward with a regional initiative, it should promote dialogue on common regional opportunities and address them one by one.



*Frédéric Grare*

## INTERESTS

Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan are primarily linked to the Indo-Pakistani conflict. Accordingly, Pakistan has managed to turn almost every other dimension of its regional policy—such as its dispute with Afghanistan regarding the border issue and Pashtunistan, and its dealings with Central Asia and the United States—into a zero-sum game with India.

Preventing a dominant Indian influence in Afghanistan, which could evolve into an alliance between the two countries and trap Pakistan in a two-front situation, is Islamabad's first objective. Paranoia feeds its strategic outlook, hence the floating accusations of terrorism and sabotage, conspiracy theories regarding Indian consulates in Afghanistan, and allegations of Indian support for the Baloch and Wazir insurgencies. A stable, friendly, and cooperative Afghanistan, in the eyes of Pakistan, is necessarily an Afghanistan under close Pakistani control, denied all possibilities of direct trade with India.

The Pashtun question is an issue in its own right and reflects to a large extent Pakistan's identity-related insecurities. It concerns both Afghanistan's irredentist claim on the territories located between the former Durand Line and the Indus river as well as to the primacy of the ethnic identity of the Pakistani Pashtuns. It is also an economic problem for Pakistan, as smuggling across an unrecognized border deprives the Pakistani state of billions of rupees every year. Islamabad fears Pashtun irredentism and Afghan claims over the territories between the Pak-Afghan border and the Indus River. This explains the constant rift between the two countries over the demarcation of the border. Historically, because of Pakistan's military superiority over Afghanistan, the Pashtun issue has been a problem only in relation to India. Today, this issue has two facets: a) India is accused of supporting the insurgency directly or indirectly in Waziristan; b) the lack of Pashtun representation in the Afghan government. "Pashtun alienation" (as it's called) refers to the lack of fair representation in the current Afghan government, supposedly dominated by the Panjshiris, who are considered favorable to New Delhi. Islamabad views Karzai as only a cover for Panjshiri domination.

In addition to preventing Indian influence in Afghanistan, securing U.S. and international support *against* India, even if indirectly, is also one of Pakistan's key interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan has never been able to secure the long-term alliance against India it desires. In recent history, it has only garnered U.S. commitments to its security on an ad hoc basis. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was one such occasion. The "war on terror" against the Taliban in Afghanistan and against al-Qaeda in Pakistan presented a similar opportunity. The U.S. presence in Afghanistan and its military support to Pakistan are seen as parts of the same equation. The former is seen as a guarantee against dominant Indian influence in Afghanistan, the latter as a way of strengthening the Pakistani forces against India. Hence the \$4 billion Pakistan spent on conventional equipment for its army and air force, taken from the \$15 billion the country received from the United States ostensibly as a reimbursement of its expenses in the war on terror.

Central Asia is viewed through the same prism of Indo-Pakistani relations, albeit to a lesser degree. As a potential alternative supply route to Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics, in particular Tajikistan and

Uzbekistan, are seen as a threat—not to Pakistan but to Pakistan’s centrality in the Afghan conflict. An alternative supply route would likely diminish U.S. and international dependency on Islamabad and, indirectly, on Islamabad’s overall Afghan policy, making the United States less likely to accept Pakistan’s demands and therefore benefiting India.

The refugee issue is only of secondary importance to Pakistan. As of March 2009, 1.7 million registered Afghan refugees were still living in Pakistan, where they are also allowed to work and attend school. While there is a long tradition of hospitality in Pakistan, these refugees are a drain on the country’s scarce financial resources. Only a peaceful and relatively stable Afghanistan would allow their return to their homeland.

These interests are sometimes contradictory but do constitute the background against which Pakistan’s Afghan’s policy is formulated.

## POLICIES

Pakistan has positioned itself in support of U.S. and international objectives, and on September 12, 2001, it officially announced the end of its traditional support for the Taliban. Since then the country has provided some logistical facilities to the United States in the form of bases, and later to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the form of transit routes.

In practice, however, Pakistan’s policy is more ambivalent and complex. On the one hand, it truly supports the fight against al-Qaeda and more generally all groups it considers a threat to its own interests. But this list of antagonistic groups periodically changes. For example, the Taliban-e-Therik-e-Pakistan (TTP), which Pakistan is currently fighting, was previously one of its protégés until the TTP turned against the Pakistani army following the cycle of attacks and reprisals generated by the Red Mosque incident.

This policy is not without costs for Pakistan, both human and financial. The battles in the Bajaur district and the Swat Valley have generated a flow of internally-displaced persons that Pakistan has to manage, placing an additional burden on an already weak economy



and increasing social tensions. However, these costs are sometimes seen in some quarters as the price to pay for the realization of Pakistan's larger objectives and are therefore acceptable (even more so if they are paid for by the international community).

Finally, Pakistan has accepted entry into a tripartite dialogue with Afghanistan and the United States to try to control the border and helped organize the 2004 and 2005 elections in the Afghan refugee camps.

On the other hand, Pakistan keeps supporting, training, and funding a number of terrorist groups in the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. Despite tremendous foreign pressure, Pakistan has done virtually nothing against the Afghan Taliban movement present on its territory; the Quetta and Peshawar shuras still operate from Pakistani soil.

A relatively new phenomenon has also emerged in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, traditionally a launching pad for jihadi operations in Afghanistan: the replacement of local jihadist organizations by more extensive Punjabi ones, Lashkar-e-Taiba being the most prominent. Because of the post-9/11 effect of the fluidity of jihadist affiliations, it would be unfair to see the process as an operation entirely staged by the Pakistani army. The similarity with the Pakistani army's strategy in Kashmir, however, is too striking to be coincidental.

The Pakistani strategy in the area is highly selective. Pakistani officials clearly indicate that they want to hit one specific tribe, the Mehsuds, from which the TTP originates, in order to teach other groups a lesson and keep them quiet, on the basis of which they will conclude peace agreements. They have also stated that they will not touch any organization that does not target the Pakistani state. As a result, this policy protects, for example, Lashkar-e-Taiba—a group with an international agenda, as demonstrated by the Headley affair, but always presented by the Pakistani army and intelligence agencies as a local organization.

## RELEVANT OTHERS

For Pakistan, the relevant others are primarily Afghanistan, India, Iran (although to a lesser extent), and the United States. All other countries

are perceived as secondarily important, including those of the international coalition. The nature of the game varies according to the “other” in question. Pakistan is partly cooperative, partly confrontational with the United States and Iran, and zero-sum with India.

Afghanistan is the primary other. It has never accepted Pakistan as the rightful successor state of British India, opposing its accession to the United Nations in 1947 and claiming a substantial part of Pakistan’s territory as its own. To add fuel to the fire, the AfPak border remains disputed. The Durand Line effectively no longer exists, and a clear border has still not been demarcated. Moreover, decades of political interference by Pakistan have annihilated the capital of sympathy that Islamabad initially enjoyed as a result of its hospitality toward Afghan refugees.

Relations with India are the least complicated but the most confrontational. According to Pakistan, whatever India does in Afghanistan is a ploy against Pakistan, be it economic investment, infrastructure, or any related matter. Although militarily absent from Afghanistan, New Delhi is undoubtedly a significant contributor to the reconstruction of the country. Thus, the reopening of Indian consulates in Afghanistan and the building of roads and other infrastructure have systematically been interpreted by Pakistan as conspiracies against its interests. As a result, Pakistan has ensured that Indian interests would be blocked whenever and wherever possible. It has refused, for example, to give India and Afghanistan transit rights to trade goods across Pakistan. The conflict has occasionally turned bitter, as when Pakistan sponsored a terrorist attack against the Indian Embassy in Kabul.

Iran is seen more or less as part of the Indian equation, as a great deal of Indian goods and logistics travel through Iranian territory. Moreover, Indian roads link the Iranian port of Shah Bahar to Afghanistan in what Pakistan perceives as a means of bypassing it to access Central Asia. But Iran also has some concerns of its own vis-à-vis Pakistan. It is deeply uncomfortable with Islamabad providing bases for the United States in the region as well as with Islamabad’s support of the fundamentalist Sunni Taliban regime. Iran almost went to war against the Taliban in 1998, bringing another competitor, Saudi Arabia, into the region. As a result, Tehran cooperated with the United States in 2001 and continued to do

so until Washington named it as part of the “axis of evil.” Confrontation between the two, however, is limited by the fact that the two are neighbors and cannot afford to fight each other. In Pakistan’s case, this is compounded by its substantial (15 to 20 percent) Shi’i minority. Furthermore, Pakistan and Iran have cooperated on the nuclear issue.

Relations with the United States are more complex and are only minutely accounted for by the prevailing anti-Americanism in Pakistan. Although part of the Pakistani army probably wishes the United States would depart the scene, Pakistan would prefer on the whole that the United States stay and share the burden. An isolated Pakistan is one that would have fewer resources to devote to promoting its interests in general and against India in Afghanistan in particular. Moreover, Pakistani and U.S. interests partly converge on the issue of counterterrorism. Both desire the elimination of al-Qaeda, about which they share a similar threat perception.

American and Pakistani interests differ, however, on important matters. For example, the United States extends its approach to counterterrorism to a whole range of international groups. Pakistan, however, as mentioned above, is selective about which groups it deems a threat (and even actively supports some of them).

The United States also officially supports the Karzai government, which Pakistan is trying to topple through its Taliban proxies. As indicated above, the current Afghan government is perceived by Pakistan as hostile because Tajiks supposedly control all the important positions (at the expense of the Pashtuns). Because they are thus alienated, the Pashtuns revolt against Kabul, supporting the Taliban insurgency. For the United States, the return of a Taliban regime would mean sanctuary in Afghanistan for hostile terrorist groups.

## RECONCILING COMPETITION

Afghan and Pakistani interests will be difficult yet possible to reconcile. While no agreement on border demarcation will be found any time soon, the initiative of a demarcation mechanism could be launched by a

major international institution (such as the G8) in order to begin the process. Such an initiative would inform and educate the populations and make them more amenable to a concrete compromise later on. From there, trust could be gradually reestablished.

The United States does not have any territorial ambitions in the area. For Washington, pursuing a counterinsurgency strategy makes sense only to the extent that it will prevent a new terrorist sanctuary in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, its key interests are control of the Afghan government in one way or the other and preventing its territory from being used against it. A *quid pro quo* between the United States and Pakistan is therefore possible.

The more successful the joint fight against al-Qaeda, the easier it will be for Pakistan to have the United States look the other way when it comes to protecting groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba. The defeat or victory of the Taliban insurgency would, however, assume a totally different meaning with regard to relations with Pakistan, depending on whether counterterrorism operations to eliminate al-Qaeda will be successful or not: If al-Qaeda is eliminated, differences between Pakistan and the United States can and will be accommodated. The United States will be able to claim victory, and, although there will remain concerns regarding other terrorist organizations with an international agenda, the pressure to exit Afghanistan may prevail over these concerns.

Reconciling Iran's interests with Pakistan's is also possible. Each desires that Afghanistan not serve as a springboard for aggression against the other. A *modus vivendi* between them can therefore be found.

Reconciling interests with India is of course a different story. Given the recent past, no measure is likely to appease the concerns of the two countries. Attempts at reconciliation during the Musharraf era, however modest, have given way to bitter infighting between the two countries, the most striking example being the attack against the Indian Embassy in Kabul, carried out with ISI support. Even Afghan neutrality, along Swiss lines, would leave Pakistan and India suspicious of each other.

Finally, one cannot act on the assumption that Pakistan is wholly reactive on the topic of India-Pakistan relations and that its policy merely reflects India's. Pakistan is a revisionist power. It would be a

mistake to think that trying to solve the Kashmir issue would help resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. It is not clear whether any measure in this regard would be likely to calm Pakistan's paranoia. It would also send the wrong message—that “terrorism pays”—as the revisionist country would effectively be rewarded for its support for terrorism, and encouraged to continue along the same path in other parts of the world.

## IMPACT ON COALITION GOALS

The impact of Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan is indeed destructive and destabilizing. From its Pakistani sanctuaries, the insurgency has managed to penetrate areas where it was once absent, including the North of Afghanistan. It is rarely in a position to provide actual benefits to the population, but denies the government the opportunity to establish control. Since 2005, the insurgency has spread to a radius of 50 kilometers, all centered on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border.

Yet it would be unfair and inaccurate to describe Pakistan as the sole or even the main culprit in the failure of coalition operations in Afghanistan. The basic incapacity of the government itself explains a good deal of the popular support for the Taliban—the population being caught between a predatory state and Taliban terror.

Whether Pakistan has fallen victim to its own Afghan policies is also an open question. The increase in terrorism in Pakistan itself could lead one to believe just that. However, it should be observed that none of the groups now targeting the Pakistani state have ever been very active in Afghanistan. Their agenda has always been a Pakistani one.

Viewed from a more optimistic perspective, one may also consider that Pakistani interests should ultimately converge with those of the larger international community. A Pakistan that has secured its objectives in Kabul is likely to behave differently than the one currently challenging the status quo in Afghanistan through various proxies. Stability will then become its real, not simply rhetorical, objective.

Last but not least, Pakistan will be central in the agreement-making process vis-à-vis the present quagmire in Afghanistan. In a political environment where the political pressures to exit Afghanistan are on the rise, there is the temptation to view Pakistan as a destabilizing factor only as long as, and because, it feels threatened by its neighbors. The reality is different: Pakistan is a revisionist power and, in the eyes of India, an aggressor. It will therefore continue to feed its own paranoia. For this reason, concessions to a Pakistan that will not renounce terrorism as a means of pursuing its foreign policy objectives is likely to lead to a resurgence of the very organizations the coalition has been trying to eliminate for the past eight years. In a regional context where the political balance might have been altered in favor of Pakistan, such concessions would constitute regression and would make little sense from a security perspective.





*Gautam Mukhopadhyaya*

## INTERESTS

India's interests in Afghanistan have been typically perceived in terms of a strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan for power and influence in the country. More accurately, there is intense political competition between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan today driven by real or imagined security concerns. But India's larger interests in Afghanistan extend beyond Pakistan to its desire for increased trade and new economic (especially energy) and cultural ties with Central (and Western) Asia through the traditional land route where it finds itself at a disadvantage vis-à-vis China.

India's security concerns involving Afghanistan are concrete and tangible. They include (1) the prospect of the return of the Taliban and its likely impact on militant Islamic fundamentalism in the region in general and Pakistan in particular; and (2) what it perceives to be the Taliban's symbiotic relationship with a revanchist military-jihadi nexus in Pakistan that India holds responsible for a series of security challenges,



political reversals, and terrorist incidents that (involving Afghanistan alone) include the use of jihadi forces nurtured in the region by Pakistan against India in Jammu and Kashmir since the 1990s, the unceremonious exit of India from Afghanistan with the arrival of the Taliban in Kabul in 1996, the Kandahar Indian airlines hijacking and terrorist-hostage exchange in December 2000, and the two bomb attacks against the Indian Embassy in Kabul in July 2008 and October 2009.<sup>1</sup> India sees the visible hand of the Pakistani military in these incidents as the closest examples of state-sponsored terrorism today.

The territory of modern-day Afghanistan has historically been a staging ground for almost every overland military expedition into India, whether to plunder or to rule, from Alexander to the Central Asian Turks to the Mughals. Culturally, Afghanistan was also a gateway for Arab–Indian exchanges of knowledge and learning, Sufi Islam, Greek and Persian arts and aesthetics, and the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and beyond. This shared tradition of religious tolerance stands in sharp contrast to the currents of Wahhabism sweeping through the region today—currents that India would like to keep at bay.

In sum, India has an abiding interest in (1) containing, and if possible reversing, the tide of Islamic fundamentalism and militancy in the region; (2) an independent, united, peaceful, multiethnic, and non-extremist Afghanistan capable of standing on its own feet; (3) stronger economic relations and cooperation in the region on trade, transit, and energy; and (4) continued long-term international engagement in Afghanistan.

## INDIA'S AIMS REGARDING COALITION ACTIVITIES

There has been a broad congruence between Indian interests and coalition political-military activities in Afghanistan in preventing the return of the Taliban, defeating al-Qaeda, and trying to stabilize Afghanistan around a non-Taliban order. India was a supporter and net beneficiary of the post-9/11 U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and recognizes that the U.S. and coalition presence in the region is necessary, at least for some time, to prevent the return of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

There are, however, differences of perception between India and the United States/coalition over specifics, notably (1) the relative threats posed by al-Qaeda, the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, and the Pakistani security establishment to their respective security interests;<sup>2</sup> (2) the arguable confluence of interests between the U.S and Pakistani military in tackling the Taliban in “AfPak” and the reliability of the Pakistani military as a partner in the campaign; (3) perceived coalition susceptibility to Pakistani sensitivities (and propaganda) over India’s role in Afghanistan and its linkage with India–Pakistan issues; (4) the role of other neighbors and regional stakeholders in dealing with the resurgence of Taliban extremism in AfPak; and (5) the issue of negotiations with the Taliban. These differences have been handled discreetly so far but could spill out into the open over the extent to which Pakistan is allowed to shape any future negotiated political settlement in Afghanistan.

India broadly agrees with the need to pursue a civilian-sensitive counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, at least until the Taliban’s current momentum has been reversed. It strongly supports the development of the Afghan security forces and their eventual takeover of security responsibilities as the best guarantee for the independence and long-term stability of Afghanistan. India also supports the U.S. commitment to remain actively engaged in Afghanistan, though it may differ on how this should be put into effect.

India feels that the sophisticated U.S.-led counterinsurgency strategy needs to be complemented by more robust political, economic, and diplomatic strategies. India particularly supports the inclusion of other regional players, such as itself, Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics, rather than relying solely on the Pakistani military, which has a stake in keeping the Afghan Taliban alive in support of its interests in Afghanistan and India. This dependence (in India’s view) leaves the coalition vulnerable to Pakistani manipulation and conditions for cooperation that are contrary to the coalition’s objectives in Afghanistan.

India is also concerned that the reduced U.S. counterinsurgency goals and expedited withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and training of the Afghan National Security Forces may be too limited and too rushed to reverse the Taliban’s momentum. Following the

January 2010 London Conference on Afghanistan and hurried efforts to reach out to the Afghan Taliban even before the first post-surge operations commenced at Marjah, it may doubt even the coalition's resolve to fight. It fears that the United States may leave the job half-done, with part of the Taliban embedded within the Afghan power structure and the rest melted into the unprotected countryside to impose its writ by force after the U.S. departure.

India believes that such an outcome could be even more dangerous than the situation in 1996–2001 when the Taliban were in power, because of the extent to which jihadi groups have now gained ground in Pakistan, strengthened ties with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and assimilated the ambitions and methodology of al-Qaeda (for example, Lashkar-e-Taiba). It does not rule out the possibility that some of these groups have set their sights on Pakistan's nuclear stockpile.

## POLICIES

India's approach to promoting its interests in Afghanistan has been mainly political and developmental, and long predates the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Though it backed the Northern Alliance politically and to some extent militarily against the Taliban when it was in power, post-Taliban, India sought promptly to rebuild its relationship with the Pashtuns, and quickly aligned itself with the post-Bonn Agreement government in Afghanistan headed by Karzai. It swiftly revived its ties with all ethnic groups and political formations in Afghanistan through its consulates in Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Herat. India has also embarked on humanitarian, reconstruction, and development projects all over Afghanistan. It has no interest in deploying troops to Afghanistan, which it feels could affect its good reputation in the country, but concern over the security of its personnel in Afghanistan could necessitate an expanded paramilitary presence.

India believes it can contribute best to the goal of stabilizing Afghanistan by its ongoing efforts aimed at building institutions, developing businesses and human capital, and strengthening the capacity of the

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Afghan state to provide for the security and welfare of its own citizens with a view to an independent, pluralistic, democratic, and united Afghanistan. It favors stronger, more Afghan-centric, and more inclusive regional economic and political approaches to the country's problems.

Diplomatically, India has a strong interest in forging as broad a coalition as possible against the return of the Taliban. However, it feels the lack of a suitable regional or international forum that brings together all major stakeholders in this endeavor. It therefore favors the inclusion of such regional players as Iran, Russia, and itself, among others, as occurred at Bonn, which it regards as a possible model for such a forum.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of such a forum, India has had to pursue its policy toward Afghanistan more or less on its own. It has done so within the space provided by the coalition, eschewing measures or initiatives that might be considered too sensitive. India feels that regional players should be involved in support for any future Afghan reconciliation process, and that any regional approach should have a strong economic underpinning.

Politically, India has until recently maintained an uncompromising position on the Taliban, firmly opposing any deals with them. It has now moderated its position slightly, indicating support for the Afghan government's efforts to integrate fighters, and going along with the London consensus on the reintegration package and effort to reach out to the Taliban out of deference to the Afghan government, subject to conditions set by the latter. Skepticism over any significant Taliban willingness to reconcile, share power within a pluralist political framework, change its jihadi character, or sever links with other violent extremist Islamist organizations is, however, likely to remain. It also doubts that the impact of any eventual return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan would be limited to that country.

Economically, India lacks direct road or rail access to Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it has committed over \$1.2 billion in humanitarian, reconstruction, and developmental assistance for Afghanistan, making India the fifth largest international donor to Afghanistan with projects spanning hospitals, infrastructure, and the social sector.<sup>4</sup> While it promotes bilateral commercial relations with Afghanistan in general,

India's economic investments there have been mostly developmental, rather than aimed at the exploitation of Afghanistan's natural resources. It has also made strategic investments in opening sea, road, and rail links through the Iranian port of Chahbahar to enhance its access to Afghanistan and Eurasia, as well as reduce Afghan dependence on Pakistan for trade and transit. India believes that its development assistance to Afghanistan is guided by Afghan needs and priorities.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, India's capacity to help Afghanistan is limited by the lack of physical access and international susceptibility to Pakistani sensitivities to India's presence and activities in Afghanistan. As a result, India is not able to contribute to, for example, the training and development of the Afghan security forces and army as much as it could. It also feels that it can do much more in terms of sharing India's experience in nation building (including the evolution of political institutions and the relationship between Islam and the modern state<sup>6</sup>) and development (such as in critically needed areas like agriculture, employment generation, nutrition, licit cultivation of opium, and so on).

The lack of direct land access and transit arrangements between India and Pakistan also deprives Afghanistan of the benefit of India's huge market for its goods and services. This has economic as well as political implications. Freer access to the Indian market would stimulate the Afghan economy, especially in the Pashtun areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan with which India has had a traditional trading relationship. It would also channel local energies away from insurgency toward peaceful economic activities.

India is a strong advocate of regional economic cooperation involving all of Afghanistan's neighbors to form transit corridors linking the energy-rich West and Central Asian region with the energy-deficient subcontinent. The primary obstacle to such links within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which Afghanistan joined in 2005, has been the state of India-Pakistan relations, particularly Pakistan's reluctance to facilitate freer trade and transit between India and Pakistan and beyond.

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## RELEVANT OTHERS

India's interests and policies in Afghanistan converge broadly with those of other key players, such as the U.S.–NATO–International Security Assistance Force coalition, Iran, Russia, the Central Asian Republics, and to some degree even China—but diverge fundamentally from Pakistan's. India, Iran, Russia, the Central Asian Republics, and China share a common interest in combating the spread of drug trafficking and militant, fundamentalist Islamic ideology out of Afghanistan, though the degree to which these concerns translate into common action varies depending on other competing interests and concerns.<sup>7</sup> There are also nuances over approaches to Pakistan.

India's differences with Iran on Afghanistan relate primarily to the need for U.S. forces to remain in the country at least until the Afghan army and security forces are strong enough to deal with national security threats on their own. Differences with China relate to China's strategic support for Pakistan in relation to India, its reluctance to put pressure on Pakistan to act against extremism in third countries in general and Afghanistan and India in particular, and possible competition for influence in Afghanistan (where China is a relative newcomer) and Central Asia (where China is far ahead). Any convergence on the threat posed by militant Islamist separatism and terrorism is presently offset by China's "all-weather friendship" and support for Pakistan, though how China might react in case of the extreme scenario of a radical regime in either Afghanistan or Pakistan remains to be seen. It would seem that there is scope for discreet consultations between the United States, China, and India on this issue. India could also explore possible joint economic approaches with China in Afghanistan. There are no significant differences in interests between India and Russia or the Central Asian Republics over Afghanistan except insofar as they may relate to third countries.

In general, India believes that: (1) all these countries have an interest in preventing a return to power of the Taliban; (2) their differences matter less than their points of convergence; and (3) cooperation among these countries could contribute significantly to countering

the resurgence of the Taliban and stabilizing Afghanistan. They would also have an economic interest in developing Afghanistan as a North–South and East–West land bridge connecting Eurasia and the Arabian Sea, and Central and West Asia and the Indian subcontinent, respectively. These points of convergence have not been adequately explored on account of bilateral political differences, regional instability, and the lack of an inclusive forum in which they can be discussed. While not minimizing the difficulties of forging a regional consensus on Afghanistan involving the United States, India feels that such a regional approach should be encouraged.

In contrast, Indian and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan are virtually antithetical. India's clash of political, security, and economic interests with Pakistan over Afghanistan has been elaborated above. At heart, India sees Pakistan's entire Afghan policy as predicated on Pakistan's unfinished agenda against India over Kashmir, which it doubts the Pakistani military establishment will ever abandon (even, it appears, at the cost of severe blowback within Pakistan). It regards other possible Pakistani motivations as secondary.

Pakistan, on the other hand, views its investment in the Taliban as a strategic asset vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan in general, and especially with a view to installing a friendly regime in Afghanistan, limiting Indian political influence there, neutralizing Afghan Pashtun nationalist opposition to the Durand Line, and projecting Pakistani interests and influence in Central Asia. It typically sees any Indian presence and influence in Afghanistan, even those acquired through legitimate means, as inimical to its interests. It views the activities of India's embassy and consulates in Afghanistan, and its association with the Northern Alliance and Afghan security organizations, with a suspicion bordering on paranoia. At its extreme, it regards any Indian presence in Afghanistan as intended to encircle and/or destabilize Pakistan itself (such as through alleged Indian subversive activities in Balochistan) for which it has presented scant evidence so far.

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## RECONCILING COMPETITION

Of all the stakeholders in Afghanistan today, India shares common interests with every state other than Pakistan. There are also significant differences between the United States and India on America's Pakistan policy, especially over a possible privileged Pakistani role in any future negotiations on a political settlement for Afghanistan and its implications for India, which, if not handled properly, could strain U.S. relations with India.

India would have no problem with any non-jihadi government in Afghanistan. However, for India to willingly countenance a militant fundamentalist or Pakistan-backed government in Kabul, it would minimally require that such a regime (1) maintain normal diplomatic relations with India and ensure the safety of its embassy, consulates, and development projects; (2) guarantee against its use for Pakistani or jihadi ends; and (3) that Pakistan abandon its own use of jihadi militancy and terrorism as instruments of state policy against India.

Pakistan too has security-related concerns vis-à-vis India in Afghanistan, notably fears of a possible Afghan-Indian alliance resulting in two-front war against Pakistan. India feels that such fears are vague and have no historical basis. It also dismisses Pakistani suspicions of serious Indian involvement in aggravating the separatist problem in Balochistan.

Pakistan is trying to actively project this perceived Indian threat to the coalition through private and public diplomacy and linking the Afghan issue with India-Pak relations and the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. It demands that India reduce its troops on India's western borders if Pakistan is to address the Taliban threat on its border with Afghanistan. In general, Pakistan is pushing the idea that the international community must prevail upon India to satisfy at least some of its concerns in relation to Afghanistan and bilateral India-Pakistan issues in return for Pakistani cooperation against the Afghan Taliban. In anticipation of a role in negotiating with the Taliban, Pakistan has also significantly increased the level of its destabilizing cross-border activities against India as well as its demands vis-à-vis India and the United States.



India rejects the Pakistani contention that Indian troop deployment on its borders, especially in Kashmir, constitutes a threat to Pakistan, viewing it instead as a defense against Pakistani-sponsored terrorism. It does not see the Afghan problem as a derivative of India–Pakistan problems that has to be addressed from that angle (as Pakistan tries to project it). It considers it a serious violation of the norms of inter-state conduct that Afghanistan should be made to pay the price for Pakistan’s bilateral problems with India in the form of destabilization and a desire for “strategic depth,” or that Pakistani state institutions should use terrorism to fight a proxy war against India in India or a third country. Nor does it believe that the Pakistani military will sever its links with or fully cooperate with the coalition over the Afghan Taliban, even if India were to reduce troops across Pakistan’s eastern border, and views any cooperation by Pakistan in this regard as selective and aimed only at securing concessions from India. India also does not accept that Pakistan should be rewarded for its cooperation with the coalition by political concessions from India, when it is, in fact, the Taliban’s prime backer.

Given these almost diametrically opposed impulses, interests, strategies, and positions, it is difficult to see how Indian and Pakistani positions on Afghanistan can be reconciled. While India may be central to Pakistan’s calculations in Afghanistan, in India’s view, India–Pakistan issues are not the most important issue bedeviling the AfPak problem, which are first and foremost internal to AfPak. They also involve other bilateral relationships, notably U.S.–Iran, U.S.–Russia, and other bilateral and third-party relationships. These problems can be best tackled by bringing together all Afghan parties, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and major coalition and regional players in one or more formats.

## IMPACT ON COALITION GOALS

India believes that its principled opposition to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, its commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan around a non-Taliban regime, its constructive activities in Afghanistan, and its broad acceptance by all but the most extreme Islamist forces in the country are in

line with the interests of the Afghan people and contribute to the success of coalition objectives. At the same time, it feels that the limitations placed on its presence and role in Afghanistan on account of exaggerated Pakistani fears have constrained its ability to contribute more to the improvement of the situation, and have in fact compromised coalition goals in Afghanistan. Rather than feed such misplaced concerns and sensitivities, India feels that Pakistan needs to be told firmly, with all the influence that the coalition, neighbors, regional players, and friends can command, to relinquish its India obsession and concentrate on the threat posed by religious extremism and terrorism within the country through political, economic, and military means—a move the international community is prepared to support. India, which shares the threat posed by such elements in and to Pakistan, is likely to respond positively to such a change of priority and focus.

There have been a series of recent developments in and concerning the region, including the London Conference and its impetus in favor of negotiations with the Taliban; the Marjah operation and the surge in counterinsurgency operations in southern Afghanistan; the recent capture of Mullah Baradar and other leading Taliban commanders by Pakistan, suggesting a new level of cooperation with the coalition; official talks between India and Pakistan for the first time since the Mumbai attacks of November 2008; fresh terrorist actions against India in Pune and Kabul; and the hardening of Pakistan's positions and rhetoric on a variety of bilateral issues relating to India. These have introduced new dynamics that will take time to discern. They will almost certainly mark a new chapter in the problems of the region.

## NOTES

- 1 To these may be added the February 26, 2010, attacks on Kabul hotels that killed several Indian officials on bilateral cooperation missions in Afghanistan, among other Afghan and foreign nationals.
- 2 For example, while both the United States and India oppose the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the United States seeks primarily to prevent the country from becoming a sanctuary for al-Qaeda, while India is more concerned about the Taliban's willingness and vulnerability to be used as a tool for Pakistani interests and machinations against India.
- 3 President Obama's March 27 proposal encouraged the establishment of a "contact group" on Afghanistan, but this suggestion has not been followed up.
- 4 See *India and Afghanistan: A Development Partnership*, Ministry of External Affairs, India. Important development projects include the 218 km Zaranj-Delaram road in Nimroz province; the Pul-e-Khumri-Kabul power transmission line that provides electricity to Kabul (both completed); the Selma dam irrigation project in Herat and the new parliament building (under construction); the Indira Gandhi hospital in Kabul; 675 training slots each for Afghan civil servants and undergraduate and graduate students in Indian training institutions and universities; another 100 for agricultural sciences pledged at London; and self-employment and technical training programs for women and youth.
- 5 Two recent polls by Gallup and the BBC-ABC-ARD showed India as the country whose projects and presence in Afghanistan were the most popular and appreciated of any country.
- 6 The adaptation of India's 150 million-plus Muslims to the loss of political power, partition, minority status, and a secular polity and democratic traditions has largely escaped Islamic and scholarly attention.
- 7 Thus Iranian willingness to cooperate with the United States is limited by larger differences over Iran's nuclear intentions. Russian readiness to cooperate with the coalition, already signaled in its agreement to allow the transit of lethal and non-lethal supplies for the latter's Afghanistan operations, are complicated by strategic rivalries and gamesmanship over NATO's eastward advance into countries that were once part of the erstwhile Soviet Union, and U.S. influence in Central Asia.



*Karim Sadjadpour*

## INTERESTS

“Iran,” Henry Kissinger not long ago observed, “must decide whether it’s a nation or a cause. If a nation, it must realize that its national interest doesn’t conflict with ours. But if the Iranian interest is to destabilize the region, then it will be difficult to come to an agreement.” Nowhere is this dichotomy between Iranian national interests and revolutionary ideology more evident than in Afghanistan.

Tehran has a strong national interest in a stable Afghanistan for a number of reasons. First, having received more than two million Afghan refugees over the last three decades, Iran has no desire to welcome more as result of continued instability and civil strife in Afghanistan. Given Iran’s already high rates of unemployment, underemployment, and inflation, it is scarcely in a position to accommodate another influx of refugees. Second, with one of the highest rates of drug addiction in the world, it is imperative for Tehran to try to reduce the production and distribution of narcotics from Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, a return to power of the inherently anti-Shi’i Taliban in Kabul would create religious and

strategic tension with Iran, which nearly fought a war against the Taliban over this issue little more than a decade ago.

At the same time, however, the current Iranian government's deep animosity toward the United States often trumps the two countries' shared interests in Afghanistan, motivating Tehran to undermine U.S. efforts even though the repercussions may be inimical to its own national interests. In the last few years, for example, Tehran has at times simultaneously supported and undercut both the Taliban and President Hamid Karzai. And while Tehran actively calls for an end to coalition activities in Afghanistan—ostensibly fearful of Afghanistan becoming a U.S. client state from which the United States could base attacks on Iran—Iranian officials have privately admitted that a continued, if limited, U.S. presence helps keep the Taliban at bay and serves as a source of leverage for Tehran.

## POLICIES

In the interest of stabilization, Iran has invested heavily—although far less than the \$600 million in aid it publicly committed—in reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. Tehran has helped rebuild schools, provide emergency food assistance, and build libraries throughout Afghanistan. It has funded the development of Afghanistan's power sector, agriculture, and transportation grid. Much of Iranian attention is focused on Herat, a major city on Afghanistan's western border. Iran's largest automobile maker, Iran Khodro, recently announced it was investing 20 million dollars into a new car manufacturing plant in Herat. Additionally, Iran has opened a chamber of commerce in order to facilitate continued trade ties with Herat province.

Culturally, Iran is seeking to strengthen historical ties and extend its influence with many of Afghanistan's Persian-speaking and/or Shi'i ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. A branch of Mashad-based Ferdowsi University is soon set to open in Herat, and Iranian textbooks exported to Afghanistan openly praise Iranian-backed militant groups Hizbollah and Hamas. Iran maintains

ties to major Shi'i clerics in Afghanistan, including Ayatollah Mohammad Asif Mohseni, who oversees a television and radio station and a prominent religious seminary in Kabul.

With an estimated two million opiate addicts, Iran has aggressively sought to counter the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan, and has already participated in regional and international efforts to fight the opium trade. It reportedly seized one thousand tons of illegal narcotics in 2008 and spends roughly \$500 million per year to combat drug trafficking, much of it spent on building border walls and training customs officials. Iran's Drug Control Headquarters ambitiously claimed that a concrete wall would separate the country's entire border with Afghanistan by 2010, a goal which, so far, has not been achieved.

A mix of classified and unclassified information suggests that Iran has provided material support, often in the form of weapons, to the insurgency in Kabul. U.S. officials claim they have found Iranian-origin Explosively Formed Penetrators, AK-47s, C-4 plastic explosives, mortars, and other weaponry used by Taliban-led insurgents. In contrast to Pakistan, Iran's aid to the Taliban is restrained and ostensibly driven by a desire to foment "managed chaos" in Afghanistan in order to bleed the United States and gain leverage. As one U.S. General once put it, "Iran offers to help resolve problems that they themselves help create." As in Iraq, it is unclear to what extent Iran will succeed in being the managers of "managed chaos."

## RELEVANT OTHERS

For Iran the most relevant "other" in Afghanistan is the United States. On the surface Iran and the United States have many overlapping interests, in particular those regarding economic development, reconstruction, and combating drug trafficking. Both countries have argued that stability cannot be reached in Afghanistan without an inclusive government, comprising a broad range of ethnic/tribal and sectarian elements. Both also desire a non-radical, national government that is regionally non-disruptive.

Yet despite its interest in long-term stability in Afghanistan, Iran's Afghan policy is also a by-product of its adversarial relationship with Washington (and increasingly Europe). In this context, Iran has an incentive to frustrate and disrupt U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Most recently, Tehran shunned an invitation to attend an international conference on the future of Afghanistan in London, claiming that, "Because this meeting's approach is towards increasing military action in Afghanistan ... and because it does not take into consideration the region's capacity to solve the problems, Iran does not consider as useful attending this meeting."

The other notable "others" for Iran in Afghanistan are Pakistan and India. It is surprising that Pakistani–Iranian official relations are not worse, given the various sources of tension between them. In the late 1990s the Taliban killed several Iranian diplomats, nearly setting off a war. In recent years, frontier insecurity in the Balochistan province—which borders both nations—has increased the mistrust between the two states, as have Islamabad's close ties with Saudi Arabia (Iran's chief regional rival) and the United States.

Given the fact that neither Iran nor India wishes for Afghanistan to be dominated by Pakistan and its Taliban proxies, Iranian–Indian synergy in Afghanistan is growing. In joint statements, India and Iran have publicly pledged to cooperate to stabilize Afghanistan and to combat cross-border terrorism originating from Pakistan. The two countries have also cooperated on improving transportation and energy infrastructure in Afghanistan.

## RECONCILING COMPETITION

Tehran's unwillingness or inability to reciprocate the Obama administration's numerous overtures have demonstrated that the hardliners currently in power in Tehran view enmity with the United States to be a critical pillar of the state. It is unlikely to expect that Iran's interest calculations vis-à-vis the United States can be changed in the short term.

Moreover, convincing Iran to more closely coordinate with coalition forces is complicated by the fact that NATO is a transient element in the region with a mixed record of success at best. Like Pakistan, Iran must hedge against the possibility of a resurgent Taliban or some other new political outcome. Iran thus seeks a multi-leveled approach by investing in all actors across the political spectrum, irrespective of sectarian, ethnic, or political affiliation, to maximize its possible options in the face of uncertainty. In hedging its bets, Iran does not necessarily wish for a NATO failure, but it wants to insure against this scenario and increase its leverage in the event that failure occurs.

Thus Iran invests in the Karzai central government (Karzai has been far less critical of Iran than of Pakistan—going so far as to call Iran “a helper and a solution,” while repeatedly complaining about Islamabad’s inaction to clamp down on militants). But Iran also invests in the Shi’a of the Hazara, in the Tajiks and Uzbeks, and in the Taliban/Pashtuns. Ties with all groups ensure *some* influence in any eventual outcome and also provide Tehran with some influence vis-à-vis the United States/NATO. Iran’s capacity for spoiling is thus much greater than its ability to deliver any particular result.

## IMPACT ON COALITION GOALS

Overall, most observers believe that Iran plays a net positive role in achieving stability in Afghanistan. Its long-term development investments and efforts to combat narcotics trafficking are in harmony with broader coalition goals. Given that Afghanistan’s needs are so rudimentary in terms of building a viable state, Iran can play an important role in that process.

However, with the Iranian government increasingly run by hardliners, Iran is likely to continue supporting efforts to undermine some coalition goals in Afghanistan. Specifically, Iran may continue to support insurgents enough to inflict continued losses on the United States.



## NOTE

- 1 U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *2010 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2010/index.htm>.



*Christopher Boucek*

## INTERESTS

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a long history of interests in Afghanistan and South Asia. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Saudi government provided extensive financial support to the mujahideen. In addition to underwriting the anti-Soviet jihad, a significant number of Saudi nationals, with the active support and encouragement of the Royal Court and the religious establishment, traveled to Afghanistan to participate in the fight against the occupation. A forceful position against atheism and international communism was a key component of Saudi foreign policy throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban government, and Riyadh provided generous support for the Taliban during the Afghan civil war. Saudi Arabia has had very real concerns with regard to Afghanistan because of the historic presence of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Saudi Arabia also has a deep and multifaceted relationship with its close ally Pakistan and an increasingly troublesome relationship with Iran—both of which play out in Afghanistan.

However, Saudi foreign policy with respect to Afghanistan is not straightforward, and it is unclear whether the Kingdom has a coherently delineated policy. Saudi Arabia distinguishes between the various elements within the Taliban (hardcore adherents versus opportunistic tribal leaders), and would like to “peel off” the hard core from the broader movement. According to some in Saudi Arabia, the Taliban sought to implement a system of government not at odds with their own. The notion of an Afghan Sunni government intent on implementing Islamic law had Saudi supporters and likely still does—within the government, within quasi-governmental organizations (World Muslim League, World Association of Muslim Youth, various clerical organizations, and so on), and in the public at large. Saudi Arabia generally would like to see an Islamic government in Afghanistan that is focused on domestic propagation of religion and enforcing moral strictures within the country.

## POLICIES

Under King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia has pursued what can be described as an activist foreign policy. Traditionally, Riyadh has preferred to fly under the radar rather than be an overt player in international issues. However, in recent years Saudi Arabia has sought to engage more in key strategic areas (Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and so on), driven mostly by a recognition that the Kingdom cannot depend on other nations to act in its best interests. Saudi foreign policy has also acted in recent years to maintain a central role for Saudi Arabia within the global Muslim community.

In particular, Saudi Arabia has provided generous financial support and assistance to post-Taliban Afghanistan, including reconstruction assistance and direct foreign aid. The Saudi Development Fund has already spent at least \$500 million in Afghanistan—and will likely spend much more. It has also supported a number of reconstruction projects, including highway construction. Very large off-budget spending in Saudi Arabia, as well as private donations and funds from various Saudi

actors (senior princes, religious figures, businessmen, and so on), complicates any overall assessment of Saudi financial assistance. In short, money flows from numerous sources in Saudi Arabia to various destinations in Afghanistan. This is not organized and it is often endowed for a variety of reasons and purposes.

Riyadh has also been involved in periodic reconciliation and mediation efforts between elements of the Afghan government and the Taliban as well as between disparate Taliban factions. Although much has been made of these efforts in media reports, it appears that they have been ad hoc and informal. At times these have been reportedly requested by the Karzai government, while at other times they have appeared to be more opportunistic, such as taking advantage of pilgrimage visits to Saudi Arabia by various Afghan figures. It is unclear if these efforts have been at King Abdullah's initiative, or that of royal advisers close to the king.

Saudi foreign policy generally cannot be divorced from domestic politics. The presence of certain individuals active on specific issues often reflects trends in domestic and royal court politics. It is presumed that the Afghan portfolio is handled by Prince Miqrin bin Abdul Aziz, the head of the General Intelligence Directorate, the Saudi foreign intelligence agency. Miqrin is close to King Abdullah; neither has any full brothers, which is an important consideration in domestic Saudi politics and future succession. Miqrin's continued management of Afghan and Pakistan issues is evidence of the King's confidence in Miqrin as well as Abdullah's desire to strengthen Miqrin as a key ally.

There are a number of other Saudi actors in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Interior, the key Saudi government agency responsible for internal security and counterterrorism, has a very strong interest in Afghanistan and in pursuing al-Qaeda. The ministry is currently led by Prince Nayef, considered by many to be next in line for succession, although this has yet to be determined. Day-to-day administration of the ministry is handled by his son, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. The Saudi Development Fund and the foreign ministry are also involved in Afghan policy making, although to a lesser extent. Furthermore, Saudi religious figures maintain deep influence throughout much of the

Muslim world, and Afghanistan is no exception. In sum, there is not a unified or coordinated cross-government approach to Afghanistan.

## RELEVANT OTHERS

There are four key “others” for Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan: the United States, Iran, Pakistan, and the various Afghan parties. There are also a number of other countries with interests in Afghanistan that are of importance to Riyadh, including Russia, China, the Central Asian Republics, and India. The United States is Saudi Arabia’s most important foreign partner, and Washington and Riyadh have rarely publicly differed on general foreign policy issues. However, U.S. and Saudi policies toward South Asia do not appear to be the same. Riyadh and Washington have very different (and therefore divergent) visions of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia seems much less concerned about many of the issues preoccupying the United States.

The situation in Afghanistan has not been treated as a bilateral issue between the United States and the Saudis, although Washington is seeking to change that in part in an attempt to leverage Saudi influence in the region. The main goal of Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan has been Taliban reconciliation, but Washington has mostly been concerned with investigating illicit Saudi funds headed to Afghanistan. In sum, this is a difference between strategic conflict resolution versus tactical counterterrorism and security objectives. Maintaining the U.S. relationship is a primary objective of Saudi foreign policy, and this will not change, even as the country undergoes a pending political leadership transition. The U.S. embassy in Riyadh reportedly now has several foreign service officers tasked with handling AfPak policy.

Saudi Arabia continues to view Iran as a major threat throughout the region and the Muslim world. This stems from a number of factors, including anti-Shi’i and anti-Persian sentiments. Saudi perceptions are fueled by unrealistic (yet deeply held) fears that Washington will seek some type of accommodation or relationship with Iran at the expense of

the Saudis. Riyadh views the challenge of Iranian regional aspirations as a zero-sum game. Saudi Arabia thus views all Iranian “interference” in the region with suspicion and as anathema to its national interests.

Pakistan—a close ally—is another important actor in Saudi considerations. Saudi Arabia enjoys tremendous legitimacy in the eyes of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have close ties, and Riyadh’s interests in Afghanistan seem to be similar to Islamabad’s although the similarities appear to stem less from strategic coordination than de facto common interests such as the advancement of basic national interests and Sunni Muslim foreign policies.

The Kingdom also views various Afghan parties as key “others.” Owing to its involvement over the years, Saudi Arabia has a deep understanding of Afghanistan and the many players in the country. Many of the problematic actors in Afghanistan were very close to the Saudis, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Riyadh will want to see its clients in the country benefit in the future.

## RECONCILING COMPETITION

Riyadh’s support for “moderate” elements of the Taliban appears to be at odds with the U.S. position on the future of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia had little issue with the Taliban government (with the key exception of protection given to Osama bin Laden and other anti-Saudi global jihadists), and would like to see the return of an Islamic government. This will prove problematic for the Americans; although Washington would like to see Riyadh use its influence to co-opt Taliban elements, the preferred U.S. and Saudi outcomes are starkly different. Saudi Arabia is unlikely to alter its position, which may lead to greater friction in the U.S.–Saudi relationship. While Washington will also press Riyadh to appoint an Afghan policy coordinator responsible for Saudi policy across the government, this is very unlikely to happen in any truly meaningful way.

## IMPACT ON COALITION GOALS

Saudi Arabia would like to see an end to fighting in Afghanistan and the elimination of al-Qaeda and other anti-Saudi militants from the country. This largely accords with U.S. and coalition goals. However, the final form of government and its position on a number of issues will likely be a point of contention. It appears that Saudi Arabia would like to see a cessation of violence and development of a unity government in Afghanistan. This would likely involve key elements of the former Taliban movement. An Islamic Afghan government—influenced and shaped by Riyadh—would be unlikely to focus on Washington’s core concerns. Differences may arise from the role of religion in society, application of Muslim family law, and gender equality in education and employment. Saudi Arabia’s desired outcome in Afghanistan differs from the American outcome in this regard.



*Martha Brill Olcott*

## INTERESTS

All five Central Asian Republics perceive their own national security as directly tied to developments in Afghanistan because of the transnational threats that originate in that country, or just beyond in Pakistan. The three states that border Afghanistan (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have the greatest level of concern. While each of these countries wants the international coalition to succeed, broader national interests shape the degree and kind of national participation that has been offered. Leaders in all five states believe there are risks as well as potential benefits associated with participation in coalition activities. Nonetheless, each has been willing to participate, albeit always mindful of the possible impact on the relationship with Russia and on its own population. In particular, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan have rented airfields to NATO. Only Kyrgyzstan's are still in use, although the French International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) contingent makes more limited use of the Dushanbe commercial airfield in Tajikistan. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan also all play major roles in



facilitating transport of non-lethal cargo along the new Northern Distribution Network. Turkmenistan, which pursues a foreign policy based on “positive neutrality,” will not provide direct support for ISAF military activities, but it has permitted the transport of humanitarian cargo and grants limited over-flight and emergency landing or other facilities.

The security of all five Central Asian Republics is being compromised by the drug trade coming from Afghanistan’s opium production, which has fostered organized criminality throughout the region as well as contributed to the growing problem of drug addiction, higher incidences of HIV/AIDS, and human trafficking. In the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the scale of drug trafficking has seriously undermined the state, creating alternative power structures in parts of southern Kyrgyzstan in particular, and conditions of potential state capture in Tajikistan.

Local officials claim that drug trafficking provides a source of financial support for localized Islamic extremist groups, and all fear the larger threat that comes from the continued presence of al-Qaeda’s camps in the Afghanistan/Pakistan nexus. The Central Asian Republics continue to differentiate between the threats posed by al-Qaeda and the risks associated with the Taliban’s presence in Afghanistan, which they feel may be managed without the presence of an international coalition. Moreover, there is concern that in the absence of a negotiation process that includes key elements of the Taliban, an international security presence could exacerbate the regional security situation.

The three Central Asian Republics that border Afghanistan—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—each interpret developments in Afghanistan through differing national security filters. Turkmenistan has always been the least troubled by developments in Afghanistan, and in the late 1990s the government of Saparmurad Niyazov even briefly officially recognized Taliban rule. Niyazov wanted to be able to export gas across Afghanistan, and he believed that Taliban rule would create the stability to make this possible. Given Turkmenistan’s long and largely porous border with Afghanistan, its priorities have been to maintain good relations with tribal leaders in western Afghanistan (where Ismail

Khan has dominated even under the Taliban) and to keep drug trafficking through the country under some sort of Turkmen state control.

Uzbekistan's border is smaller, and the Uzbek government does a good job of monitoring it. The government is more concerned about the porous nature of Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan, which allows in large quantities of drugs and terrorists bent on damaging the Uzbek state. Uzbeks see the latter as further facilitated by what they maintain is at best an indifferent and at worst complicit attitude of the Tajik and Kyrgyz governments, as these terrorist groups enter Uzbekistan by crossing the territory of both countries.

Tajikistan's security calculations are shaped by the fact that Tajiks are the second largest ethnic community in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Tajiks in both countries retained connections throughout the years of Soviet rule, while Afghanistan was under Soviet occupation, and through to the present day. During the Tajik and Afghan civil wars, opposition groups from each country sought safe haven across the international border of the Panj River. Tajikistan's aims in Afghanistan remain relatively inchoate. They have no interest in facilitating the destabilization of the Karzai government, but if Afghanistan were to splinter into openly competing ethno-religious and ethno-political groupings, Tajikistan would seek to advance the cause of Afghanistan's Tajik minority.

## POLICIES

All of the Central Asian Republics viewed the ISAF operation as positive, and at least at the outset each believed that enhanced security and/or economic advantage would likely accrue from it. Leaders in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan believed that the destruction of al-Qaeda camps (which they regarded as a realizable ISAF goal) would improve their security situation. Turkmenistan, however, was much more interested in reviving stalled gas transport projects involving Afghanistan.

The Uzbeks and Kyrgyz (in that order) were quick to offer military base access to the United States. The Uzbeks were willing to risk

Moscow's ire to cement a steadily improving security relationship between Tashkent and Washington, while President Akayev believed Kyrgyzstan's national security would be compromised if Uzbekistan became the sole regional ally of the United States. Both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan felt too constrained by their relationships with Russia to make similar offers, but two years later (in 2004) President Rahmon (whose country already had a Russian military base, but no Russian border) offered NATO limited airfield rights. The Uzbek–U.S. relationship was beginning to sour by that time, as NATO's military assistance was substantially less than the Uzbeks expected, and Tashkent's increasingly flawed record on human rights was proving to be an embarrassment in the United States and European Union. Germany, though, retained access to their adjoining base facilities. The U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan has twice almost been closed, once after Akayev was ousted from power (his family allegedly received inflated jet fuel prices in return for charging the United States low rents for the base) and then again in 2009, when the United States accepted a substantial annual rent increase and the downgrading of the facility from a base to a transit center (meaning that U.S. troops were subjects of Kyrgyz law) in order to preserve the site.

Since making a bid to head the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Kazakhs have played a much greater ISAF support role than previously. They hope to chair an OSCE summit on Afghanistan in 2010, and they are the only Central Asian nation sending foreign assistance money to Afghanistan (relatively small sums to date, including a \$50 million education grant), and are considering sending a detachment of engineers to join the ISAF forces. Kazakhs have participated in this capacity in Iraq, but to date neither Kazakhstan nor any other Central Asian nation has contributed troops to ISAF. This is partly because their armed forces are “off-springs” of the Soviet forces that battled there in the 1980s, and also because fighting against members of ethnic affinity groups runs the risk of leading to al-Qaeda or Taliban-inspired attacks within the Central Asian countries. There have been unsubstantiated rumors, though, that the Uzbeks may consider sending troops in return for U.S. security assistance incentives,

but this would be a major departure in policy. The return to prominence of Uzbek warlord Ahmed Rashid Dostum, who earlier fought with the Soviets and retained close ties to Tashkent, however, could lead to greater Uzbek engagement in some form.

All of the Central Asian nations participate in the Paris Pact-mandated Rainbow Strategy of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to counter the trafficking and consumption of Afghan opiates. The Turkmen play a leading role in the “Caspian Sea Initiative (Violet),” which includes border management issues for both Turkmen–Afghan and Iranian–Afghan borders. As part of the same initiative, the Kazakhs host a newly organized Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Centre for intelligence sharing which includes all five Central Asian countries as well as Russia and Azerbaijan. The “Security Central Asia’s Borders (Yellow)” initiative, run out of the regional United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Tashkent, focuses on strengthening local law enforcement capacity and reversing the flow of precursor chemicals, both of which are intended to limit the flow of drugs into Russia (and beyond).

All of these states are eager to participate in regionally-based economic recovery strategies for Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, in particular, have been disappointed that major projects that would have benefitted them have not been realized. Plans to ship Turkmen gas to Pakistan and India through a new trans-Afghanistan pipeline still lack commercial sponsors (and most of this gas will now go to the Chinese and East Asian markets). U.S., World Bank, and Asian Development Bank plans to build an integrated electricity market for Central and South Asia were to be fed by the development of giant hydroelectric stations in Tajikistan (Rogun) and Kyrgyzstan (Kambarata) that were planned in the Soviet period. No International Financial Institutions funding has yet been secured for these projects (the former is being slowly funded by the Tajiks themselves and the Russians are drafting a contract to build the latter).

The Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks all hoped that the ISAF nations would supply their troops in Afghanistan through supplies purchased in the Central Asian region. However, there was virtually no

outsourcing, even for products readily available or easily produced in these countries, particularly because the U.S. military had no interest in changing traditional procurement processes and wanted to continue using recognized vendors. Only with the introduction of the Northern Distribution Network were plans made to buy fresh food and fuel from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, respectively (for in-country ISAF operations), as a way to try and entice both these countries to participate. While the U.S. government is tapping more supply resources in these countries to support Afghan military actions, there is also active fundraising for a donor-supported, long-term, regional economic development strategy that includes the Central Asian Republics.

With the Central Asia/South Asia Regional Electricity Market's seeming demise, the focus has turned to smaller projects, with Tajikistan (through Pamir Electric), Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan all selling, or preparing to sell, electricity to regions across their borders. None of these projects are dependent upon any sort of transnational management of the Amu Darya water basin, which still shows no signs of emerging. In addition, Uzbekistan is involved in a major rail project to link northern Afghanistan with the international rail system.

## RELEVANT OTHERS

All of the Central Asian Republics have had to weigh their commitments to the international coalition with the priorities in their relationships with Russia. Some risks are worth the reward, but each state has set firm limits on its level of participation. For example, Kazakhstan would never consider giving the coalition military basing facilities, as it would entail having to make the same concession to Russia, which would be unacceptable to Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan officially cited "positive neutrality" as its reason for refusing to sign on to the Northern Distribution Network, but off-the-record accounts suggest that its leaders fear that signing on would open the door to Russia managing trade and transport across their borders. Uzbekistan looked to balance its foreign policy, and thus wanted the United States to be the country's major security partner, limiting Russia (with whom the

Uzbeks share no border) to a dominant position in its gas sector. For Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, economic security is most critical, and in both cases these countries have tried to walk a thin line between antagonizing Russia (which provides a large proportion of the national GDP through remittances sent back from seasonal workers) and jeopardizing the financial assistance provided by the International Financial Institutions. During the 2009 base negotiations with Kyrgyzstan, Russia's willingness to invest in the completion of the Kambarata hydroelectric station appears to have been a motivating factor for Kyrgyzstan to press for U.S. withdrawal (presumably at Moscow's behest). Being accorded "gate-keeper" status by Washington, rather than having NATO withdraw from Kyrgyzstan completely, appears to have been Moscow's primary goal.

The Central Asian Republics, save Turkmenistan, are all members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, but this has not created a serious impediment to coalition activities in Afghanistan. Given its inherent weakness, this organization has not managed to carve out any effective institutional position on the situation in Afghanistan, despite summit meetings devoted to the question.

## RECONCILING COMPETITION

Russia would like the international coalition to grant it a special role in the Central Asian region and to use the Kremlin either informally or through Moscow's leading role in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (in which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are active members, and Uzbekistan has frozen its membership) for coordinating NATO's activities in Central Asia as they relate to Afghanistan and more generally.

However, there is no evidence to suggest that any of the Central Asian countries, other than possibly Kyrgyzstan (whose current leadership might be willing to trade many key aspects of sovereignty for iron-clad security guarantees), would voluntarily acquiesce to such a policy. The days where the United States (or NATO) and Russia could cut a deal to impose on these states in the face of their opposition have passed.

Kazakhstan has become a very accomplished international actor, Uzbekistan only slightly less so, and Turkmenistan and Tajikistan both have multi-vectored foreign policies as well.

Whereas a few years ago China might have been willing to grant Russia a special security role in Central Asia, now Beijing is likely to feel that increasing Russia's position of privilege in the region could threaten China's growing economic interests. Iran might also be similarly unhappy with this situation, and while they have fewer levers, they too have to be engaged in any eventual solution in Afghanistan.

## IMPACT ON COALITION GOALS

The fact that members of the international coalition tend to pose the question in terms of meeting a set of goals the ISAF defines for itself rather than in concert with a broad range of regional actors, is a point of consternation in the Central Asian Republics. Even now, disappointments notwithstanding, Central Asia's leaders would like ISAF operations to last until the Afghan government has proven capable both of maintaining internal order and of controlling the country's international borders.

In most Central Asian regional discourse, premature ISAF withdrawal is considered a more serious threat to stability and security than the Taliban. Few in the region believe that the United States will have the staying power to keep troops in Afghanistan for the decade (or more) likely required to militarily defeat all the violent internal opposition to the Karzai (or an ISAF-chosen successor) regime. They also do not believe that the international community will provide enough reconstruction money or spend it in ways that will ensure an economically and politically stable government in Afghanistan.

There is substantial concern that ISAF withdrawal will occur before the Afghan government gains sufficient popular legitimacy to maintain control, leading to further fragmentation of Afghanistan, which even if short of civil war will still spill over into Central Asia. This fragmentation could take different forms. For example, throughout much of the

1990s, it manifested itself as factions within Afghanistan supporting opposition groups in Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan being prime candidates). Should premature ISAF withdrawal lead to the *extreme* fragmentation of Afghanistan, leaders—particularly in Tashkent—are concerned that this could in turn lead to fragmentation of Tajikistan and strengthen cross-border ties between ethnic kin at the expense of linkages between ethnic groups and their national governments.

The Central Asians see the inherent instability of the Afghan state as the source of the security threat. Conditions of civil war brought al-Qaeda to Afghanistan. While some of the religious ideology of al-Qaeda and the Taliban overlap, al-Qaeda received cover from the Taliban because the former financially supported the latter's cause, not because the two had a shared mission to create a global Islamic state. For the Afghan Taliban, Afghanistan is the prize, and not a stepping stone to move into neighboring states. In addition to the terrorist threat, the Taliban and the international drug trade are not inseparable. Much like Karzai, Taliban leaders tried to reduce and regulate the drug trade, but the trade facilitated the ability of their supporters to arm during the civil war. Like the Karzai government the Taliban courted foreign investors, backing some of the same projects, like the trans-Afghan gas pipeline touted both then and now as a way to create the infrastructure necessary to enhance Afghanistan's economic development.

It is for this reason that the Uzbek government in particular has been strongly advocating the creation of an international negotiation mechanism that would bring in all elements and players in Afghan society, including the Taliban, to the negotiating table. There seems little prospect that the international coalition will move toward this kind of solution (unless the Karzai government winds up losing all credibility), and this will not lead the Uzbeks or any of the other Central Asian Republics to diminish their current level of support for coalition activities. But for the Central Asians, unlike the coalition, the key is eliminating al-Qaeda from the region, not defeating the Taliban. The latter would certainly be a plus, in their view, but far riskier would be a withdrawal of forces, leaving an unstable government in power.







*Michael D. Swaine With Tiffany P. Ng*

## INTERESTS

China's interests in Afghanistan are closely connected to its larger interests concerning Pakistan and South Asia; Central Asia; domestic counterterrorism issues; the acquisition of foreign goods, energy, and mineral resources; and bilateral relations with the United States.

First and foremost, Beijing does not want its Afghanistan policies to strain its long-standing, privileged relationship with Islamabad, undermine the basic stability of the Pakistani state, or harm Pakistan's own national interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan. A stable, independent, friendly, and regionally influential Pakistan prevents Indian domination of South Asia, weakens Indian influence in Central Asia, and confounds any Indian desire to focus primarily on strategic rivalry with China. A cooperative Pakistan also contributes intelligence and policy support for suppressing domestic Chinese Muslim terrorists, and denying them safe havens in Afghanistan and infiltration routes via the Hindu Kush. Finally, Pakistan offers important opportunities for Chinese trade, investment, and energy supply routes.

Beijing's incentive to avoid disruptions in its relationship with Pakistan has increased in recent years as a result of a cooling of relations with Islamabad following the replacement of Musharraf by Zardari, tensions over the Red Mosque incident in 2007, and Chinese dissatisfaction over the growing presence of Chinese Uighur separatists on Pakistani territory. Given these factors, Beijing must carefully consider overall Pakistani policies toward Afghanistan as well as relations between segments of the Pakistan government and both the Afghan government and terrorist elements in Afghanistan. In particular, Beijing does not wish to irritate the Pakistan government by taking direct action against Afghan insurgent groups that enjoy ties with Islamabad or pose no direct threat to the Pakistani state and society.

Second, Beijing does not want the dynamic in Afghanistan to threaten its larger efforts to sustain cooperation with other regional states. While preserving or strengthening ties with Pakistan, Beijing seeks to deepen cooperative relations with India. China also desires the cooperation of other countries in South and Central Asia for a host of political, strategic, and economic reasons (for example, countering terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and smuggling; deepening economic relations; maintaining potential leverage vis-à-vis both the United States and Russia). In recent years, rising terrorist threats to China have made increased security cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, in part through the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a more urgent priority. China is also creating economic partnerships with the Central Asian republics, and the region has grown as a market for Chinese consumer goods.

Third, Beijing does not want the general situation in Afghanistan or its own actions to increase its domestic insurgent threat, drug smuggling into China, and other transnational criminal activities—primarily via facilitating or provoking connections between terrorist and other groups operating in Afghanistan (and the AfPak border area) and insurgents, terrorists, and criminals operating in Xinjiang. For example, some Chinese fear that Washington's troop buildup, and/or direct Chinese involvement in forcibly suppressing terrorist elements in Afghanistan, could drive the Taliban into China and put Chinese economic interests

in Afghanistan at risk. In general, China faces cross-cutting pressures in dealing with the terrorist threat in Afghanistan: on the one hand it favors those actions that would suppress clear threats against China; on the other hand, it is extremely cautious about taking any actions that might provoke terrorist attacks on China beyond current levels.

Fourth, Beijing does not want Afghanistan to become the base for a long-term, sizeable U.S. political, economic, and military presence in Central Asia nor give the impression to others that it is directly or indirectly supporting such an outcome. Many Chinese observers believe that a long-standing U.S. presence would cement Washington's "strategic encirclement" of China and weaken China's influence among other Central Asian states, while exacerbating regional unrest. In addition, many Chinese fear that a close alignment with U.S. policies could incite greater terrorist actions against China or provoke further unrest among its domestic Muslim population (China has become a target for groups well beyond ETIM and Balochi nationalists ever since its involvement in the Red Mosque incident). More broadly, as on other issues, many Chinese simply resist being associated with U.S. policies because of an opposition to Washington's arrogant and "hegemonic" proclivities, and a desire to preserve or advance Beijing's image as a leader of developing countries against great power aggression.

That said, China does not want the United States (and the West) to fail in Afghanistan in ways that threaten its interests, nor does it want to be pulled into militarily assisting the United States in a potential quagmire. The greatest consequence of a U.S. failure for China would be the radicalization of the region to the point that extremism becomes contagious among ethnic minorities in China. Thus, some Chinese observers argue that Obama's troop surge in Afghanistan might actually benefit Chinese efforts to suppress terrorist and separatist activity within Xinjiang, as well as drug smuggling into China. In addition, Beijing certainly does not want to be seen by Washington or the international community in general as obstructing U.S./Western efforts in Afghanistan. Indeed, it wishes to be seen as supporting "international" attempts to stabilize the Afghan government in ways that increase U.S. incentives to reduce troop levels and limit long-term U.S. political influence.

At the same time, although rarely discussed in Chinese open sources, Beijing undoubtedly sees strategic value in Washington remaining mired in Afghanistan (and Iraq) for some time, believing that such distractions will undermine U.S. incentives to treat a rising China as a strategic adversary.

Finally, Beijing has growing economic interests in Afghanistan, including a \$3.5 billion project for the development of the Aynak copper mine and associated transport and electricity-generating facilities (making China potentially the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan). China has also provided notable aid to Afghanistan (mainly in the form of infrastructure projects in communications, irrigation, public hospitals, and so on, as well as police training), and has strong political and diplomatic ties with the Afghan government. Afghanistan also has oil, natural gas, iron ore, and other resources of potential significant interest to China.

Some non-Chinese observers believe that Beijing's growing economic interests in Afghanistan will play an increasingly important, perhaps decisive, role in its overall calculus toward that country, especially given the supposed importance of such ventures for China's development. This is by no means clear at this point, however. The most important projects have only just begun or are still in the planning stage, with many bureaucratic, financial, security, corruption, and other issues to resolve or address before they can be deemed a success. Moreover, it is difficult to see how such projects can be regarded as critically important to China's massive economic (and especially energy) needs. That said, such commercial activities and resources provide important benefits to China's developing economy, and reinforce Beijing's stake in a stable and friendly Afghan government. They also benefit relations with the United States by serving as a significant indicator of support for U.S. nation-building efforts in Afghanistan. Many Chinese believe that by exploiting Afghanistan's mineral reserves, China can provide thousands of poverty-stricken Afghans with jobs, thus generating tax revenues to help stabilize an already volatile Kabul government. But these economic interests are decidedly secondary to China's strategic interests.

## POLICIES

China provides significant levels of humanitarian, infrastructure, and financial assistance to Afghanistan. It has also begun developing minerals and energy resources in the country, committed personnel to assist in landmine clearing and police training, and established cooperation on antidrug measures. It has also shown support for the Afghan government on relevant UN resolutions, greater diplomatic contacts, and steady involvement in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation efforts to address the Afghanistan situation (in particular terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime).

China has also publicly declared its support for broad U.S./international objectives in Afghanistan. The Joint Statement between Obama and Hu Jintao stated that both countries "... support the efforts of Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight terrorism, maintain domestic stability and achieve sustainable economic and social development..." On the other hand, Beijing is open to attempts to leverage U.S. difficulties in Afghanistan and Pakistan to its advantage. For example, some observers believe that Beijing has fished for signs that Washington might be prepared to trade concessions over Taiwan for non-lethal assistance to U.S. military operations in South Asia.

In addition, Beijing is reportedly examining whether to open its border with Afghanistan in the Wakhan Corridor as an alternate logistics route for troops and supplies. However, the corridor is problematic from both a geographic and an infrastructural standpoint because of the rough terrain and poor roads. And some Chinese analysts believe that any infrastructural improvements might ease the transit of Islamist fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan into Chinese territory.

China has not sent combat troops to Afghanistan, provided or facilitated logistical support for the U.S.-led multinational effort, or otherwise contributed directly to the forcible suppression of terrorists in that country. It has neither directly urged nor pressured the Pakistani government to strengthen its actions against domestic terrorists in the AfPak border areas or otherwise contributed to counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan. However, Beijing has agreed to provide military training to the Afghan government.

In short, Beijing has positioned itself as supportive of Afghanistan's long-term stability and prosperity through limited political, economic, and diplomatic assistance. It has also been careful to remain on good terms with the Kabul authorities without offending the Pashtuns or their political leadership in the Taliban. It has furthermore tried to support Pakistan's policies, not change them.

## RELEVANT OTHERS

For China, the relevant "others" include Pakistan, the United States, the Central Asian Republics, Russia, and India. China's interests and policies toward Afghanistan mostly accord with Islamabad's desire to improve relations with Kabul, to avoid being unduly pressured to attack those AfPak border-based terrorists that do not pose a threat to the Pakistani government and society, and to prevent excessive U.S. pressure and incursions on Pakistani sovereignty. More broadly, Beijing's unique relationship with Islamabad supports Pakistan's strategic and economic interests in a variety of ways, as indicated above. Beijing and Islamabad have a common interest in maintaining the special, close (and to some extent closed) nature of their bilateral relationship, despite the apparent cooling in their relations that has taken place in recent months. Chinese policies toward Afghanistan do not threaten that interest. China's efforts to improve coordination with India and Russia in addressing various Afghan problems might cause concerns in some Pakistani policy circles, but such concerns are probably not major.

China's behavior has more mixed implications for American interests. Beijing contributes significantly to the non-military (and in particular commercial and social welfare) aspects of the U.S.-led effort to stabilize Afghanistan, despite concerns over corrupt Chinese practices in winning major bids on mineral ore projects. China also contributes to some level of coordination among Central Asian states in support of the eventual goal of an independent and terrorist-free Afghanistan, which accords with U.S. interests to at least some extent. On the negative side, it is probably not offering as much military (and perhaps even

non-military) assistance to the counterterrorism effort in Afghanistan as Washington would like, especially given China's experience in UN-authorized peacekeeping operations. Perhaps most importantly from the U.S. perspective, China is not doing enough to persuade or pressure Islamabad into attacking Afghani terrorist elements operating in or near the northwest tribal areas.

Regarding Central Asia, Beijing has arguably played a positive (or at least neutral) role since 2005 in not encouraging or acquiescing to any efforts by the republics to openly oppose U.S. policies toward Afghanistan. As noted above, China has supported actions by the republics that show support for the Afghan government and general attempts to stabilize the country. However, some Central Asian policy analysts view Beijing's support as motivated solely by great power considerations involving the United States, India, and Russia, rather than by concern for the interests of the Afghan people.

China's policies toward Afghanistan are broadly convergent with Russian interests in most respects but differ on the details. Both wish to see a stable, united, terrorist-free Afghanistan. Moscow also wants U.S. forces to withdraw from the country (and the region) as soon as possible. But while Russia would probably prefer the complete eradication of the Taliban under a government more aligned with the Northern Alliance, China is more supportive of Pakistan's ambiguous stance toward the Taliban and the Karzai government. In the economic arena, China's growing involvement in Afghanistan's mineral and energy sectors may produce suspicion and resentment in Russia, given its own commercial interests in the country. Finally, although perhaps not terribly significant, the Afghanistan problem could become a source of competition between Moscow and Beijing over who controls or coordinates that issue within Central Asia, and especially within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

By contrast, Chinese behavior toward Afghanistan is far less congenial to India's interests. Beijing has done little if anything to encourage or compel Pakistan to shift some of its military forces away from the Indo-Pakistani border and redeploy them in counterterrorism operations in the northwest tribal areas. Indian preoccupation with Pakistan



denies New Delhi a free hand to pursue aggressive policies toward China. Perhaps more importantly, Beijing is regarded in many Indian policy circles as supportive of Pakistan's stance toward Afghanistan (Afghanistan has been a major area of political competition between Islamabad and New Delhi for decades). Such suspicion no doubt endures regardless of what China does vis-à-vis Afghanistan, given India's strong resentment against Beijing's policies toward Islamabad. Finally, China has its own reasons for backing Pakistan's efforts to dislodge India from the position of influence it has attained in Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan (where New Delhi now has five consulates).

## RECONCILING COMPETITION

Beijing's stance toward Afghanistan is rooted largely in fundamental Chinese strategic interests that extend well beyond Afghanistan itself: specifically, China's suspicion toward and nascent rivalry with the United States, and its support for Pakistan in the latter's struggle with India. It is unlikely that China's behavior vis-à-vis Afghanistan will conform better to Washington's regional goals or mollify New Delhi's suspicion without a change in these larger strategic calculations.

Perhaps the most important "competitive" feature of China's stance toward Afghanistan is its unwillingness to compel or persuade Islamabad to devote more resources and energies to the destruction of Afghanistan-oriented terrorist groups operating out of Pakistan. Given China's interests and Islamabad's calculus toward both India and Afghanistan, it is highly doubtful that Beijing will ever become more cooperative on this point. Even if Pakistan were to alter its stance in positive directions, there is still no guarantee that Beijing would follow suit, because of its larger desire to keep Pakistan focused on India, both militarily and politically. In fact, it is more likely that the Chinese leadership would attempt to bolster a faltering Pakistani regime by providing more support to its military and intelligence services, while increasing economic and diplomatic assistance to Islamabad and strengthening the Sino-Pakistani border. In any event, it is unclear

whether China enjoys sufficient leverage over Pakistan to compel or persuade Pakistan to do its bidding vis-à-vis Afghanistan, regardless of the larger circumstances. In general, the Chinese rarely resort to such high pressure tactics. They usually do not make demands for action, only demands that actions not be taken, which is one reason many countries have good relations with them.

## IMPACT AND PROSPECTS FOR COALITION SUCCESS

China's stance toward Afghanistan is in many respects conducive toward the larger effort to achieve stability in that country and to attain coalition goals. However, China is unlikely to prove pivotal to the outcome of the Afghanistan situation unless the United States and other powers believe that Chinese influence over Pakistan is absolutely critical to that outcome.

It is virtually impossible to know with certainty how Beijing views the chances for success of the U.S. strategy (with success defined as the establishment of a stable, secure, and relatively supportive Afghan regime and society for more than a few years). However, this analysis, reinforced by the comments of many unofficial Chinese observers, suggests that most Chinese view those chances as highly unlikely at best, and doomed to failure at worst. This view is probably in part derived from the Pakistani view of the prospects for U.S. success, which is if anything even more pessimistic.





*Dmitri Trenin*

## INTERESTS

Russia views Afghanistan today largely through the prism of security threats to itself and its Central Asian neighborhood, over which Moscow aspires to soft dominance. Afghanistan is also an element of Russia's complex and complicated relationship with the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the AfPak situation carries strong implications for Russia's relations with major non-Western powers, such as China, India, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In Russia, rational calculations of interests and analyses of threats are rooted in the Soviet Union's traumatic experience in Afghanistan (the "Afghan syndrome") and the post-Soviet Russian experience in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Tajikistan.

Russia perceives two primary threats from Afghanistan. One is the prospect of instability in Central Asia should the Karzai government fall and the U.S./NATO military forces withdraw precipitously. This scenario carries a sense of *déjà vu*: The Taliban's initial rise to power in Afghanistan encouraged Central Asian Islamists and offered training camps to Chechen rebels. Russia fears a rise in Islamist radicalism across the region and a revival of rebel activity in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

It neither has sufficient confidence in the solidity of Central Asian regimes nor in its own capacity to insulate the region from the influence of a victorious Taliban. Still, opinions differ in Russia as to how far the threat can reach. While some Russians espouse a version of the domino theory and expect the “disaster area” to spread all the way to Russia’s own borders, most believe the Taliban would not expand far beyond Afghanistan itself.

The other threat—drug trafficking from Afghanistan—is more concrete and deadly. Russia is no longer a major narcotics way station but has become a major consumer of Afghan heroin and opiates. According to the United Nations, Russian annual consumption of heroin (70 tons) is only slightly less than the consumption of the rest of Europe combined (88 tons). Out of about 100,000 worldwide drug-related fatalities each year, 30–40,000 are Russian. Russian officials point out that the production of narcotics in Afghanistan has grown exponentially (by a factor of 44, according to the Russian government’s anti-drug czar, Viktor Ivanov) since the fall of the Taliban and the arrival of coalition forces.

Moscow has historically had relatively little interest in Afghanistan per se. In the years of the Great Game, Russia was content to have Afghanistan be a buffer zone between its empire in Central Asia and Britain’s in India. They valued Afghanistan’s neutrality in the Cold War, when both Pakistan and Iran were U.S. allies and China was locked in its own conflict with the Soviet Union. But they were surprised by the leftist coup that proclaimed Afghanistan a Moscow client, and intervened only reluctantly when that regime threatened to disintegrate and create an opening for the United States. After this painful, decade-long offensive, the Russians preferred to forget about Afghanistan—that is, until the Taliban arrived. The Taliban seizure of Kabul and then almost the entire territory of the country left the Russians concerned about the potential of their expansion to the North, into former Soviet Central Asia. The U.S. military operation in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, which Moscow actively supported, removed that threat. However, the outcome of the U.S.-led engagement in Afghanistan remains far from clear. Thus at present, Russia’s aims in Afghanistan include: (1) prevention of an outright victory for the Taliban, essentially by supporting the U.S.-led coalition; (2) stemming the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan

into Russia; and (3) restoring a pacified, neutral, and stable Afghanistan as a buffer state between Central Asia and the Greater Middle East.

But while Russia aims to prevent the return of the Taliban and to end the drug trade, its paramount interest in the region is to maintain and accrue influence in Central Asia through its relations with Afghanistan. As northern Afghanistan is directly linked to Central Asia, Russia's interests are mostly concentrated in the North of the country, with its largely Tajik and Uzbek population. There, Russia continues to cultivate the close ties it developed with the Northern Alliance. This ambition, however, is unattainable. Russia does not work as a magnet for its neighbors. For their part, Central Asian countries do not want to be seen as Moscow's clients; their refusal to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia richly attests to that. Russia has been playing on Central Asian concerns that Afghanistan will again become a base for their domestic radicalism, in the hopes of increasing Russia's own military and security presence in the region, and to beef up the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. The mere threat of a Taliban victory in Afghanistan supports Russian interests in Central Asia.

Russia's other interests are marginal. The trade turnover in 2008 was just under \$200 million. Soviet geologists did discover oil and gas fields in northern Afghanistan, but at present Russian business groups would prefer, if anything, to invest in neighboring Central Asia, which is richer in all kinds of resources, much more familiar to the Russians, and immensely safer than Afghanistan. Russians also tend to believe, wrongly perhaps, that U.S. influence in Afghanistan minimizes their chances of doing business there. Moreover, China has emerged as a formidable economic rival to Russia in Afghanistan. It defeated Russian companies in the bid for the Ainak copper reserve, one of the biggest in the world. Russia's *negative* economic interests in Afghanistan are more important than its positive ones. In other words, Russia is more interested in preventing others from availing themselves of Afghanistan's resources than it is of obtaining those resources itself. In order to protect its markets, Gazprom is seeking to block a projected gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and an oil pipeline from Pakistan's port city of Gwadar to China.

## POLICIES

Publicly, Russia supports the international effort to stabilize Afghanistan. In December 2009, President Medvedev publicly endorsed Barack Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan and offered Russia's support to Kabul, Washington, and NATO.

Moscow appreciates that the international operation has a UN mandate and that the parameters of Afghanistan's post-Taliban rehabilitation were laid down at the Bonn conference in which Moscow participated. Even though a number of senior Russians would privately like to see the United States fail in Afghanistan (and join the Soviet Union and Britain as casualties in that "graveyard of empires"), pragmatic Russian leaders realize that a Western defeat in Afghanistan would result in an uncontrollable rise of radicalism. In a joint article published in the *New York Times* on January 12, 2010, General Boris Gromov, the last Soviet commander in Afghanistan and now governor of the Moscow region, and Ambassador Dmitri Rogozin, Russia's representative to NATO, lashed out at European "pacifism" and called upon NATO to continue its mission in Afghanistan until reasonable political stabilization is achieved there.

Even though Gromov and Rogozin refer to the Russia-led effort to establish a rapid reaction force in Central Asia as a security hedge in case NATO fails in Afghanistan, they should realize the limits of what such a force, when actually created, could do. The idea of sending Russian forces to Afghanistan is roundly rejected by the Russian government. The bulk of the country's political establishment and the general public still suffer from "Afghan syndrome," 20 years after the Soviet withdrawal from the country.

There are differences of opinion within the Russian establishment. Those who see the United States as Russia's main geopolitical adversary want it to stay bogged down in Afghanistan indefinitely, preventing a Taliban victory while unable to prevail themselves. They favor a policy of watching the Afghan developments from the sidelines, giving no serious assistance to the U.S./NATO forces there, and are ready to cut a deal with the Taliban should it emerge in a strong position in the end.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who advocate much closer cooperation with the United States and NATO on Afghanistan. They hope that, by extending a helping hand to the United States, they will be able to sway future U.S. policy (on issues of importance to Moscow) in favor of Russian interests. To the first group, this view looks naïve.

A third group, composed of more straightforward thinkers, believes that coalition success in Afghanistan is already in Russia's interest, since that would remove the most serious external challenge to date to Russia's own security. Chaos in Afghanistan, they fear, might lead to the "Talibanization of the region," including Central Asia, which Russia will be unable to manage. The resulting interplay of these basic positions has led Moscow to give support, albeit modest, to the Afghan government and the coalition.

Russia has maintained regular contact with Hamid Karzai, his government officials, and certain local warlords to keep abreast of the developments in the country. Moscow has also extended military assistance to Kabul in several ways. It has expressed willingness to train Afghan police and military officers and sell the Afghan government arms, military equipment, and spare parts. In January 2010, Moscow offered to rebuild some 140 industrial enterprises and infrastructure installations in Afghanistan, such as bridges and dams that had been built by Soviet engineers, provided the international community awarded Russian companies contracts without holding tenders and paid for their work. Since Russia re-established its embassy in Kabul in 2007, it has been considering, in principle, making a comeback in Afghanistan—this time as a business partner. However, it still hedges its bets, unsure about either the Karzai government's longevity or the strength of the Western commitment. Moscow does not want to run afoul of new Afghan authorities, should the present ones be replaced. By pursuing such a course, it hopes to win a measure of political influence, mostly to ensure that Afghanistan is not used by others against Russian interests, including economic interests. This influence is now all but absent. Until recently, Russia has enjoyed sympathies of a group of senior Afghans it befriended in the 1980s during its occupation of the country, and again in the 1990s, from among the Northern Alliance leaders.



Moscow, however, neglected to use the opportunity to turn this group into something like a pro-Russian lobby.

Russia has signed agreements with the United States, Germany, France, and Spain allowing the transit of non-lethal military goods and, in some cases, personnel, weapons, and military equipment across Russian territory—up to 4,500 flights each year (as of late January 2010, the flights have not started in earnest). Thus, Russia sought to increase its value in the eyes of the United States as well as to demonstrate the “privileged” nature of its relations with some of the key countries of continental Europe.

Russia has been trying to engage the United States on the drug-trafficking issue. It believes that curtailing production of opium inside Afghanistan is the most effective way of handling the situation. Beyond Afghanistan’s borders, Russian officials claim that the high price of drugs simply inhibits the fight against trafficking. More likely factors are the high degrees of corruption in Russia and the Central Asian countries and inefficient anti-drug agencies. According to the UN, Russia and the Central Asian states interdict only 4 and 5 percent of the traffic, respectively—far less than Iran, Pakistan, or China.

Moscow has long pleaded with NATO to establish alliance-to-alliance relations with the Collective Security Treaty Organization it leads. This is deemed an important sign of Western recognition of Russia’s politico-military primacy in Central Asia. Zbigniew Brzezinski’s support for this idea notwithstanding, NATO has shown little interest in it. Acting on its own, Russia has transformed its understrength motor rifle division into a small military base in Tajikistan on the Afghan border and has established a small air base at Kant, Kyrgyzstan. It has also been looking for another base in the South of that country, which it wants to turn into a Collective Security Treaty Organization outpost.

At the same time, Russia has been trying to diminish the U.S. military footprint in Central Asia. In 2005, it used the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to demand an end to the U.S. military presence in Central Asia. It leaned on Kyrgyzstan to follow the Uzbek example and expel U.S. forces. However, the more recent intensification of fighting in Afghanistan and the need to enhance U.S./NATO

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forces there, which Russia basically supports, is at odds with its desire to see the back of the U.S. military in Central Asia. Unable to usher its exit from Central Asia, the Russians have to be content with sending periodic messages to Washington—for example, through biannual SCO military exercises, conducted since 2005—that the U.S. military is not the only game in Central Asia.

## RELEVANT OTHERS

Moscow clearly feels its position in Central Asia challenged by others, above all by the United States, which it regards—here as well as in most other places—as *the* main competitor. This attitude highlights the central contradiction of the Russian position. While the U.S./NATO operation in Afghanistan deals with a very serious security challenge to Russia, it has also made the United States a power in Central Asia at Russia's expense, as seen from Moscow. When Putin in 2001 acquiesced to the United States acquiring the use of air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, he made it clear that Russia considered those deployments temporary, for the duration of the stabilization effort in Afghanistan. That effort has been going on for over eight years now.

The rise of China has challenged Russia's position in Central Asia even more fundamentally and permanently than America's insertion into the region. However, Moscow, while traditionally allergic to military expansionism, is relatively tolerant toward the projection of economic influence, which distinguishes the Chinese practice in Central Asia from America's. Also, it is still the United States that Russia regards as its principal competitor, not China—a legacy of the last several decades. To oppose and constrain the U.S. role in the region, Moscow has been partnering with Beijing in building the SCO into a major international forum that includes, beyond China, Russia and Central Asia, key players such as India, Pakistan, and Iran. Afghanistan, like the three latter countries, is an observer. In March 2009, the SCO held a conference in Moscow on Afghanistan to raise its own profile. Its budget, however, is a mere \$4 million, and it has no chance

of playing a significant role within Afghanistan, including that of a mediator between the Kabul government and elements of the Taliban. Its (useful) specialization remains regional summitry.

Afghanistan is also an issue in Russia's relations with India and Pakistan. New Delhi has been Moscow's close partner, even a quasi-ally, for decades. India was one of the very few countries that refused to condemn the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Today, Russia has no opposition to India's political presence in Afghanistan. Both countries suffer from terrorist attacks and are fighting Islamist radicals. Yet the Indo-Russian relationship has become a shell. There is little consultation, and virtually no coordination, between the two countries on issues relating to Afghanistan. Even though Russia occasionally mounts public relations campaigns highlighting Brazil, Russia, India, and China (sometimes just Russia, India, and China) as pillars of a "post-Western world," Moscow is keenly aware of the rivalry between its two principal partners, Beijing and New Delhi, and is careful not to be drawn into their disputes.

This rivalry is nowhere more intense than in relations with Pakistan. For Moscow, Pakistan had long been an accomplice to Russia's principal adversary. It willingly served as a base for U.S. intelligence operations against the Soviet Union, and, most crucially, was the main base for the Afghan resistance to Soviet forces in Afghanistan, and the conduit for international aid to the mujahideen. Yet Russia cannot afford to ignore a nuclear-armed country with a population that has recently eclipsed its own. Careful not to spoil its relationship with India, Russia has been maintaining and even expanding contacts in the Pakistani government and military. The Russians realize they have little knowledge and even less influence as far as Pakistan's internal dynamics are concerned. They see Pakistan essentially as America's and China's ward, and hope that, in extremis, those two powers will prevent the worst outcome from occurring.

Moscow's contacts with Tehran are broader and somewhat deeper than those with Islamabad, but these relations are also contentious. To Russia, Iran is a key regional player whose power continues to grow, as well as an important economic partner, especially in the energy sector.

For all the difficulties of dealing with Iran, Russians see Iranians as rational and, at times, cooperative. For example, Moscow and Tehran collaborated to end the civil war in Tajikistan—the only post-Soviet conflict that has actually been resolved. Russia certainly benefitted from a benevolent Iranian attitude toward Moscow’s actions in Chechnya and its friendly position within the Organization of the Islamic Conference. With regard to Afghanistan, Russia sees Iran as a stabilizing factor in Herat and as a partner in curbing drug trafficking.

Finally, Russia maintains a relationship with Saudi Arabia, which, while not particularly close, is active and generally friendly. Moscow has taken great pains to position itself as a friend of the Islamic world, and to win observer status within the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

## RECONCILING COMPETITION

As is clear from above, there is no antagonism between Russia’s interests in Afghanistan and those of any other major player. On many key issues these interests are fairly aligned. Russia was a *de facto* “ally of the Alliance” in 2001, contributing substantially to the toppling of the Taliban by the U.S.-supported Northern Alliance forces. After that, Russia chose not to meddle in Afghan politics and thus did not contest the U.S. influence over the Karzai administration. Russia’s geopolitical rivalry with the United States is confined to the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, and also to the Caspian and the Caucasus. Even there, however, the issue is not some new edition of the Great Game. Instead it is the emergence of new states in the region that aspire to genuine independence from their former hegemon and are learning to move around on the international scene, choosing orientations and looking to strike their own balance. Russia’s dream of soft dominance in Central Asia will remain a dream.

In determining whether Moscow will support U.S. goals in Afghanistan, one must consider the wider context of U.S.–Russian—and, by extension, NATO–Russian relations. The Bush administration offered poor incentives for Russia to support the U.S./NATO efforts in

Afghanistan: NATO expansion into the former Soviet Union (Ukraine and Georgia), U.S. support for a Georgian president bent on solving ethnic conflicts in his country by force, and a U.S. plan to deploy missile defenses close to Russia's borders. Now that these irritants are tabled for the duration of the Obama administration, the view in Moscow is that the general environment of U.S.–Russian relations is now more propitious for closer collaboration on issues such as Afghanistan.

## IMPACT ON COALITION GOALS

So far, Russia's policies have been generally consonant with the coalition's goals and efforts in Afghanistan. Moscow's realistic policy spectrum lies between passive and active support for U.S. and NATO policies. Thus, Russia will serve as a conduit for U.S./NATO military supplies bound for Afghanistan and is prepared to engage more forcefully in stemming drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Active support for the coalition operation in Afghanistan will only have a marginal impact on the outcome, given the size of the U.S.-led presence.

Russia does not hold a singular opinion on the present U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, but even those sympathetic to it point out that the Obama strategy focuses on only two issues: strengthening the Afghan government forces and thwarting the Taliban's drive to oust it. What is missing in Washington's approach, they feel, is a dedicated effort to help an interlocutor arise on the side of the Taliban who would be willing and able to negotiate a settlement with Kabul and, indirectly, with the United States, that would eventually stabilize the country.

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*Gilles Dorransoro*

## EUROPEAN ASSESSMENT OF A REGIONAL APPROACH

The key troop-contributing coalition partners are European countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. While the European Union (EU) is a major aid contributor in Afghanistan, it has so far been uninvolved in the diplomatic process. This will likely remain unchanged, even with the new organization of the EU. Each country has different interests and perceptions, and there is no common diplomatic framework. It is difficult even to speak of a comprehensive intellectual framework in the cases of other partners (for example, Italy and Spain) that have no major interests in the region. In addition, internally, individual state institutions (military, intelligence, diplomatic, and so on) of each country can have disparate views.

Generally, the European populations and governments do not see the threat from Afghanistan in the same way that the United States does. The UK is slightly different from the rest of Europe, as it is more militarily invested in Afghanistan. But the UK sees the cooperation of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as vital to acquiring

information about radical networks operating at home. Most of the key European countries, however, are mainly interested in securing good relationships with the United States and their places in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Their aim is more to limit the cost of engagement than to “win the war” in Afghanistan. Thus, their militaries are under political constraints to limit their casualties and to pursue a more defensive approach than the United States. Indeed, public support for the war is non-existent in these countries, and they are extremely pessimistic about the outcome of the war as it is presently being prosecuted. Indicative of a growing reluctance to send reinforcements or even stay in Afghanistan, after Canada, the Netherlands will withdraw their forces in 2011.

A regional approach favoring negotiation over war is supported by most of the European members of the coalition as a way to exit the whirlpool of conflict that is slowly destroying NATO without reasonable prospects of success. A regional approach is valued only if it helps to produce a political solution in Afghanistan. Various proposals have been suggested, often informally, but so far European countries have not been successful in any major diplomatic initiative at the regional level (the French ministry of foreign affairs organized a meeting of neighboring nations in 2008 that has yet to see concrete results). The UK, for example, openly encourages negotiation in the form of reintegration of the Taliban, but this view is not shared by all European partners.

## IDEAL REGIONAL APPROACH

According to key European partners, efforts toward any regional approach incorporating neighboring countries are impractical and should be abandoned and redirected toward a more political approach that is centered on Pakistan. Iran, the Central Asian Republics, and Russia are comparatively less engaged in the Afghan war and in Afghanistan in general, and thus have less influence on the internal balance of power in Afghanistan.

This kind of an approach would necessarily require a change in the Pakistani attitude, and ideally would be obtained by a transformation of the diplomatic relationship between India and Pakistan, delivering

security guarantees to Pakistan as well as a solution to the Kashmir issue. With a sufficient level of trust between the two countries, one could expect the “strategic depth” approach of the Pakistani military to change in favor of focusing its armed forces on the Afghan border (instead of on its India border) to counter both Afghan and Pakistani militants.

## MAJOR PLAYERS

Pakistan is the preeminent regional player in the Afghan war. Pakistani policy toward Afghanistan is mostly perceived as passive support for the Taliban, and the insurgency was able to regain ground in Afghanistan in large part because of this support. This policy toward Afghanistan is mostly defined by Pakistan’s competition with India, which is economically and politically active in Afghanistan.

Iranian policy is viewed differently by different countries and even by state institutions within those countries. Iran is a potential spoiler in the region, but it has so far exercised extreme caution in its Afghanistan policy, and thus has not played an important role in the negotiation process.

## RECONCILING DISPARATE OBJECTIVES

If the core objective in Afghanistan is “stabilization,” then the key European states would agree that Pakistan should be the centerpiece of policy. One can safely assume, however, that the core objectives of the coalition and Pakistan are at odds with one another.

The European states would like to secure the (real) cooperation of Pakistan for two reasons. First, transnational terrorist networks operating out of Pakistan are a threat to the security of some European countries (mostly the UK, but also France). Second, the full cooperation of Pakistan in combating the Taliban would dramatically ease the pressure on the ground for the UK in Helmand, for France near Kabul, and for all the European countries elsewhere in the country. The extreme unpopularity of the Afghan war has made low casualty rates a



political imperative. The success of such a Pakistan-oriented approach could be judged on the amount of pressure Pakistan exerts on the Taliban leadership in Quetta and North Waziristan, as well as on the amount of intelligence it shares with the coalition.

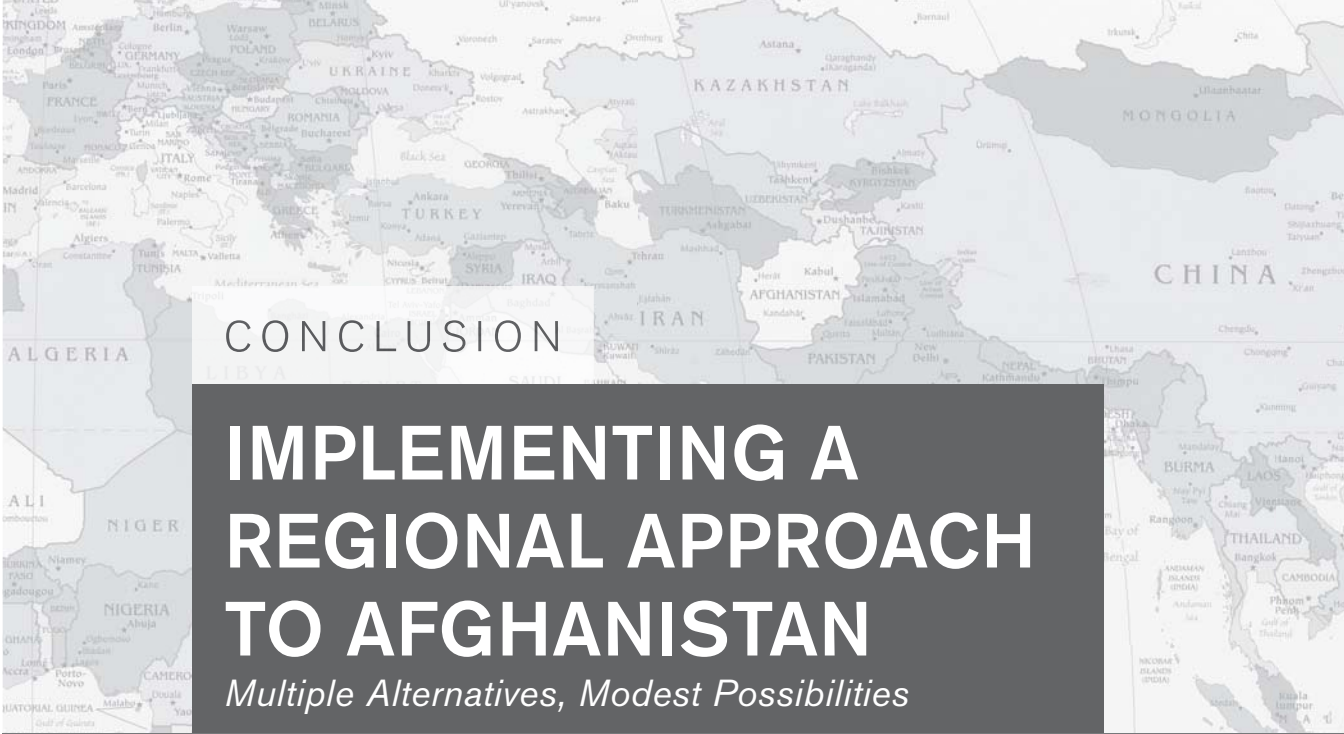
The other states have objectives that are negotiable and mostly compatible with the coalition's objectives. Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics do not aim to have exclusive influence in Afghanistan. Their objectives are more "negative": avoiding a hard-line Sunni leadership (Iran) and destabilization in the North (Central Asia and Russia).

## EUROPEAN LEVERAGE

The European coalition members have no serious impact on the regional scene. While Pakistan and (less so) India have vital interests in Afghanistan and Kashmir, the European presence is marginal, detached, and temporary. Europeans do not have the means to pressure, bargain, or guarantee an agreement on the key issues. The EU could have some impact through trade policy, but so far it is not directly involved in the regional aspects of the crisis. Only a concerted and united European approach could have a notable impact, but Europe's disparate set of national interests makes such an approach implausible.

There are few reasons to assume that a fundamental change in policy will happen. First, the war against the Pakistani Taliban is totally dissociated from the Afghan war. In addition, the anti-India rhetoric has not abated and India is still the target of attacks in Afghanistan by radical groups linked to Pakistan. Second, the Pakistani establishment has mastered the art of receiving aid from the United States while simultaneously supporting its enemy. The recent arrest of some key members of the Taliban leadership, notably Mullah Baradar, is a way for the Pakistani military to reaffirm its control over the Taliban and leverage over U.S. interests in the region, more than any major strategic shift.

Due to the time constraints, a regional approach is not a viable solution for the Europeans. In reality, given the rigid attitude of the Pakistani military elites, Pakistan's only plausible function may be as a partner for negotiating with the Taliban.



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From the beginning of his term, President Barack Obama insisted that a “regional approach” would be essential for success in Afghanistan. The Bush administration, too, gravitated toward a similar conclusion in its final days, and numerous transition documents, especially those prepared by the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department, argued that American achievements in Afghanistan would increasingly depend on Washington’s ability to confront the regional sources of instability and discord. In practical terms, this principally meant tackling the problem of Pakistan and, in particular, its policy of aiding the international coalition fighting in Afghanistan while simultaneously providing succor and assistance to the coalition’s adversaries such as the Afghan Taliban, the Hezb-i-Islami, and the Haqqani network.

When the Obama administration entered office in January 2009, it accepted this premise inherited from its predecessor, but judged the predominant focus on Pakistan to be limiting. In the prelude to its first review of the Afghan war, various officials intimated that Barack Obama’s approach would be different in many ways from that of George W. Bush: it would include a greater commitment of U.S.

ground forces; it would replace the objective of nurturing a democratic Afghanistan with more modest goals centered on building a stable nation that would be inhospitable to al-Qaeda and other forms of Islamic terrorism; it would encourage dialogue between the Afghan government and reconcilable components of the Taliban; and most significant of all, it would pursue a regional approach to prosecuting the war that would address the larger security competition involving at the very least Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Iran.<sup>1</sup>

For all its emphasis on a regional approach, however, the Obama administration has never clearly articulated what this innovation actually consists of. While it is obviously triggered by the same conundrum that confronted the Bush presidency—dealing with the Taliban’s sanctuary in Pakistan—what Obama’s preference for “broadening” the solution specifically entails has not yet been enunciated nor have its prospects of success been carefully assessed. This essay explores these two dimensions more closely.

Toward that end, it is divided into three broad sections. The first section scrutinizes the concept of the regional approach and argues that this term has given rise to at least four distinct notions, each with its own unique objectives:

- (1) expanding the Afghan theater to include Pakistan in order to synergize the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns now underway;
- (2) integrating Afghan and Pakistani efforts toward securing the common goal of defeating extremist Islam in the greater South Asian region;
- (3) incorporating Afghanistan’s and Pakistan’s major regional neighbors into a cooperative effort led by the United States and aimed at defeating al-Qaeda and the Taliban while stabilizing South and Central Asia; and, finally
- (4) unifying the hitherto separate security complexes of South and Central Asia by transforming Afghanistan into a region-wide trade and transit hub.

The second section examines the third conception of the regional approach at length. As various administration officials, both civilian and military, have argued with increasing frequency that achieving success in Afghanistan will require Washington to persuade Kabul's key neighbors to collaborate with one another and with the United States, this section reviews whether such a partnership is possible by assessing the national goals of those states important to Afghanistan's future. The key insight gleaned from this analysis is that the most significant regional stakeholders have divergent objectives where Afghanistan is concerned, thus raising questions about the viability of the regional approach promoted by Washington.

The third section seeks to answer the question of whether the regional approach to Afghanistan can actually succeed, given that the specific goals pursued by Kabul's neighbors often do not cohere either with U.S. and Afghan aims or with one another. Consequently, the treatment here expands the analysis beyond national goals by examining the various dyadic competitions and the mixed effects of various national measures—however well-intentioned some may be—in Afghanistan. On balance, the difficulties of implementing a regional approach successfully appear to be legion.

A brief conclusion finally reprises the essay's main themes.

## THE REGIONAL APPROACH'S MANY FACES

### **The Regional Approach as Military Strategy**

The first conception of the regional approach, discussed during the transition to the Obama administration, was a simple spatial expansion of the *operational* theater of war to include Pakistan. Although the war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban being waged in Afghanistan was long viewed as the strategic center of gravity in South Asia, the emerging view of the regional approach involved addressing not simply the challenges of terrorism in Afghanistan but also those of its neighbor, Pakistan. Even before the first administration review was unveiled in March 2009, the Pentagon was already implementing this notion. The

*Washington Post* reported as early as November 11, 2008, that “At [Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael] Mullen’s direction, the map of the Afghanistan battle space is being redrawn to include the tribal regions of western Pakistan.”<sup>2</sup> The regional approach thus implied that although a formal international boundary divided Afghanistan and Pakistan, the deep interconnections between the terrorist groups on both sides of the Durand Line required the U.S. military to think of the challenge as a linked, perhaps even common, operational threat.

To be sure, the threat manifested itself in different ways. In Afghanistan and along its borderlands, a truly stateless terrorist group with global ambitions and a universalist ideology, al-Qaeda, received support from numerous local allies, most importantly the Taliban, whose ambitions arguably remained focused on securing control over part or all of Afghanistan. In Pakistan, the state was threatened by diverse Islamist threats ranging from sectarian forces within the country to restive tribes in its borderlands to various other extremists, some affiliated with al-Qaeda and several previously supported by the Pakistani state itself. Many of these groups were now engaged in armed struggles against Islamabad—sometimes independently, sometimes cooperatively—against the backdrop of larger social, economic, and political deterioration within that country.

Because the U.S. military and intelligence services were involved in helping Pakistan cope with these dangers, even as they were occupied in active combat operations in Afghanistan (often against anti-coalition militants supported by Islamabad), treating the two countries as part of a unified operational challenge understandably emerged as the earliest manifestation of the new “regional” approach—and one that survives to this day. The necessity for such an integration of the battlespace became urgent because while the coalition was militarily present and operating in Afghanistan against al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their allies, it was prevented for political reasons from operating in Pakistan, where many of these adversaries were located and in fact received sanctuary. Targeting these threats in what was effectively a gigantic “keep out” zone through standoff weaponry, special forces, and covert operations required close coordination with the conventional military components

deployed inside Afghanistan. Thus, a unified strategy that treated both Afghanistan and Pakistan (or at least the Pakistani tribal belt) as a single operational theater became inevitable. This expansion of the battlespace was intended to exploit the synergies deriving from the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns underway in Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively, in the expectation that the gains deriving from each would redound to the benefit of the other.

### **The Regional Approach as “AfPak” Integration**

The second conception of the regional approach, and one that emerged somewhat contemporaneously with the first, was the policy analogue of the operational challenge. While the linked threats in Afghanistan and Pakistan justified an expansion of the Afghan battlespace in U.S. military and intelligence planning, the reasons why Pakistan was involved in Afghanistan—and often in ways that subverted coalition objectives—provoked an American effort to consider ways of mitigating Islamabad’s security challenges. This approach, which was formally inaugurated in the administration’s March 2009 review, gave birth to the notion of “AfPak,” a neologism invented by Obama’s Special Representative Richard Holbrooke both as a means of identifying the domain of his charge and to signify that the Pentagon’s embryonic concept of a unified operational space had now received the administration’s political blessing.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the defense planners’ more narrow conception of the regional approach—exploiting operational synergies across a common but differentiated battlespace—would now be reinforced by a larger political strategy aimed at reconciling Afghanistan and Pakistan and harmonizing their specific national contributions toward building regional stability.

The limits encoded in the term “AfPak” were accepted reluctantly. Consistent with President Obama’s belief that Pakistan’s troublesome behavior in Afghanistan derived intimately from its problems with India, Holbrooke had persistently sought to include the latter in his bureaucratic mandate. By in effect seeking to oversee U.S. mediation of the outstanding Indo-Pakistani disputes, Holbrooke hoped to steer

Islamabad away from its counterproductive rivalry with India. If successful, this would have reduced the value Pakistan perceived in supporting various terrorist groups operating against Afghanistan and India, thus not only diminishing internal threats to itself but also becoming a more committed American partner in the larger counterterrorism effort. The uncompromising Indian opposition to being included in Holbrooke's mandate put paid to the administration's plans for what would have otherwise been a regional "InAfPak" approach. Instead, Holbrooke and the administration were left with only the latter two components. This compelled the administration to persist with the old triangular U.S.–Afghan–Pakistan diplomacy inherited from the Bush administration, while waiting for more favorable opportunities to integrate India into regional conflict resolution.

The administration's desire to incorporate New Delhi into a regional solution to settle extant Indo–Pakistani disputes has by no means disappeared. But India's absence in the "AfPak" framework thus far, whatever its merits or reasons, spelled the doom of "AfPak" as a regional approach. Pakistan vociferously opposed the concept because of India's exclusion, and bitterly resented being lumped with its smaller and more "primitive" neighbor, Afghanistan. Afghans were dubious about the concept as well: they disliked being grouped with a threatening neighbor perceived to be opposed to an independent Afghan state and one that was anyway regarded as an "artificial" and failing entity.

In any event, the administration's vision of "AfPak" as a regional strategy—even with India's exclusion—was meant to be fundamentally positive. It was intended to capture the idea that, as National Security Adviser General James Jones phrased it during a briefing in the aftermath of an early meeting between Presidents Barack Obama, Hamid Karzai, and Asif Ali Zardari, "we have several countries, but we have one theater." What united the two protagonists, Afghanistan and Pakistan, in this vision was the fact that the coalition's war was a "common struggle" that required "concerted action" from both states not merely in the relevant battle zones but across their polities at large. Indicating continuity with the Bush administration's diplomacy on this issue,

Jones defined the “regional approach” exclusively in terms of Afghanistan and Pakistan, noting that “both governments have pledged to work together [across] a wide range of potential areas of cooperation to include security measures, and the like.”

In this context, Jones emphasized the need “to help Pakistan with a new beginning; to again help the government institutionalize democracy and make progress, recognizing that these are difficult times, and [that] the threat of extremists to Pakistan requires a concerted action. And on that score,” Jones stressed that President Obama “emphasized that this is a regional problem and this is why getting together with both Presidents [Karzai and Zardari] and our government for these few days of very intensive conferences are going to be very important, because we are going to approach this as a regional problem.”<sup>4</sup>

This version of the regional approach centered fundamentally on Afghanistan and Pakistan would change in important ways by the time President Obama reached his decision to deploy an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan in November 2009. Coming on the heels of what was in effect the administration’s second strategic review of U.S. involvement in South Asia—and the first spearheaded by Obama personally—the regional approach still remained focused on just Afghanistan and Pakistan. But in contrast to the earlier view, where Pakistan was mainly an instrument for achieving U.S. aims in Afghanistan, the priority now accorded to Pakistan equaled, if not exceeded, that previously bestowed on Afghanistan. Although this substantive transformation from “AfPak” to “PakAf” had important policy consequences, it did not change in any fundamental way the key parameters that continue to define the administration’s regional approach at the formal level—namely, the preponderant focus on just these two states. This reality has survived even the administration’s most recent rhetorical turn, which consists of quietly jettisoning the term “AfPak,” because of its grating effect on Pakistani sensibilities.<sup>5</sup>



### **The Regional Approach as Neighborly Cooperation**

The third conception of the regional approach is one that lurked in the background from the very beginning of the Obama administration and derives its appeal from the limitations of the second. Recognizing that many other countries besides Afghanistan and Pakistan are relevant for success in the theater, this third conception of the regional approach seeks to secure broader cooperation on the assumption that all neighboring states stand to gain from the U.S.-led efforts to eliminate radical Islamist terrorism of the kind embodied by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This view is widely shared within the Obama administration. It has also been consistently advocated by the senior leadership of the U.S. military, particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and senior officers of the U.S. Central Command. In fact, one of the earliest articulations of the view that region-wide collaboration was indispensable for American success in Afghanistan and Pakistan was provided by General David Petraeus, Commander, U.S. Central Command, who just before President Obama took office argued the point plainly and succinctly:

... we can't focus on only one line of operation, we also can't focus just on Afghanistan. It's not possible to resolve the challenges internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges especially in terms of security related to Afghanistan's neighbors. A regional approach is required. A key element of the regional approach, of course, is Pakistan's recognition that the existential threat to Pakistan comes from the violent extremists operating in the federally administered tribal areas in the northwest frontier province. There is an increasing recognition, in fact, that this threat poses a much greater challenge to Pakistan than does that from its traditional rival, India. Indeed Afghanistan and Pakistan have in many ways merged into a single problem set and the way forward in Afghanistan is incomplete with[out] a strategy that includes and assists Pakistan and involves India.

Beyond Pakistan, the Central Asian States must also be part of regional strategy for Afghanistan. Certainly, no state in the region wants to see Afghanistan harboring and exporting transnational extremists and the nexus between the Afghan insurgency and narcotics smuggling presents a regional security threat as well. The Central Asian States share the concerns of all about extremism and drug smuggling in Afghanistan and they also can provide a northern line of communication should that prove necessary and we are exploring that as you might imagine. So they clearly must be part of the regional approach as well. Finally, as an aside, there are even common interests between Afghanistan, the Coalition and Iran, though there are also major conflicting interests needless to say...

As I've sought to convey in my ten minutes here this afternoon, such partners will have to keep in mind that Afghanistan is not Iraq. They will have to demonstrate commitment to sustain comprehensive, coordinated approaches and they will have to develop and execute a regional strategy that includes Pakistan, India, the Central Asian States and even China and Russia along with perhaps at some point Iran.<sup>6</sup>

While the logic of Petraeus' argument is unassailable, the "cooperative security" that this third approach embodies runs into many problems. In large part, this is because many regional states have competing—and often non-negotiable—national goals in Afghanistan, even if they otherwise stand to benefit from the success of American actions focused on eliminating transnational terrorist groups based there or in its environs. Equally importantly, the United States too often has competing interests with respect to many of the regional states—interests that prevent Washington from making cooperation in Afghanistan, however desirable, the first order of business in America's

bilateral relations with these countries. For these reasons and others explored below, the kind of partnership that the third version of the regional approach demands has proved thus far beyond reach.

This hard reality, however, has not prevented many countries, including the United States and especially the Europeans, from continuing to advocate it. Thus, for example, despite the abysmal record of regional cooperation so far, the most recent international conference on Afghanistan, held in London on January 30, 2010, somewhat inexplicably affirmed “that regionally-owned and steered initiatives stood the best chance of success” in addressing the challenges of security competition in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the conference urged “the relevant regional bodies (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Economic Cooperation Organization in accordance with their respective mandates) and others including the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to develop as soon as possible a coordinated plan for Afghanistan’s regional engagement.”<sup>7</sup>

Given the problems that traditionally undermine the third conception of the regional approach, three different kinds of solutions suggest themselves, each with varying degrees of effectiveness. The first and simplest solution to the problem of competing national goals is to avoid them: instead of attempting to resolve what are often intractable political issues, focus on garnering various national contributions toward the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. This expedient allows the regional states to donate according to their means; so long as their assistance is integrated into the plans and operations of the American and Afghan governments, it serves the useful purpose of aiding the international coalition. This solution to the problems of regional cooperation is avowedly modest, but it can be valuable if it produces useful assistance to Afghanistan or to the U.S.-led coalition. However, it can also be problematic, even when it is materially most helpful, if the regional contributions end up stoking local security dilemmas because the weaker states fear that the more generous donors may in fact be gaining in influence relative to them. Despite such concerns, which have arisen most conspicuously for example in the cases of Pakistan vis-à-vis Indian aid to

Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Iranian activities in Afghanistan, the Obama administration has encouraged all the regional states to contribute to coalition efforts as generously as their capacities allow. In effect, it has endorsed national contributions as a form of demonstrating regional support for Afghanistan, even if this instrument does not by any means resolve the problems of regional competition and may in some cases even exacerbate them.

A second solution to the problem of securing effective region-wide collective action is to create institutional devices that help to align the political goals pursued by the stakeholders operating in Afghanistan. The Obama administration settled for this approach in March 2009 in the aftermath of Richard Holbrooke's appointment as the President's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although this position was created to signal presidential resolve toward the war effort, and to increase policy-making coherence within the U.S. government, Holbrooke's selection triggered a "demonstration effect" throughout the international coalition. Almost overnight, every nation involved in Afghanistan appointed a special representative to serve as Holbrooke's counterpart, resulting today in some 26 individuals holding such a position. This conclave of special representatives, which Obama designated a "Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan,"<sup>8</sup> meets periodically and serves a useful purpose: although it is too large a body to help resolve any disputes among coalition partners—many special representatives, in fact, come from countries that have neither the equities nor the competence to address the thorny issues of regional politics—it serves as a forum for sharing information and insights about U.S. policy in Afghanistan, exchanging views about the crisis, and aiding national governments in making the appropriate policy adjustments.

The third solution to the challenge of generating effective regional cooperation is the most ambitious and addresses the limitations of the second solution: reconciling the political goals pursued by Afghanistan's key neighbors and by the most important stakeholders with direct interests in that country's future. Unlike the second solution, which can at best help to better align various national policies through the medium of special representatives, the third solution advocates pulling together a

smaller “contact group that, with the coordination and backing of the international community, would develop a regional diplomacy to address the deteriorating security situation in [Afghanistan and Pakistan].”<sup>9</sup> Although different versions of the contact group idea have different advocates, all share certain common features. To begin with, the number of states admitted is relatively small and consists mainly of Afghanistan’s immediate neighbors and those directly relevant to its security, such as India and Saudi Arabia. Further, the activities of these core states are assisted by some key outside actors, such as the permanent members of the UN Security Council, or NATO, or even regional security organizations such as the European Union or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Finally, the objectives of this endeavor are fundamentally focused on resolving political differences between the key actors through a series of bilateral or multilateral “grand bargains”<sup>10</sup> that will encourage each to cooperate unreservedly in Afghanistan. Although the Obama administration has not publicly endorsed this bold solution to the problems of regional rivalry, there are many within it who champion this approach. One prominent expert on Holbrooke’s staff, Barnett Rubin, has been a particularly vocal advocate, though at least thus far his ideas have not become official policy. This does not imply that the administration has failed to see the wisdom or the necessity of promoting a resolution of regional disputes as the means of encouraging cooperation on Afghanistan. Rather, given the risks of broaching sensitive issues—even if only within a smaller grouping of states—it has preferred, at least for now, to address the problems of dispute resolution mainly through quiet bilateral diplomacy.

### **The Regional Approach as Economic Integration**

The fourth and last conception of the regional approach to the challenges in Afghanistan is one that bypasses politics, at least in the first instance, in favor of economics. At one level, this approach is perhaps the most ambitious of all because it seeks to mitigate regional competition not through the conventional means of diplomacy, as the other conceptions do in some way, but by exploiting the larger forces of globalization

and integration. Starting from the premise that the political disputes enmeshing Afghanistan's neighbors are serious and unlikely to be resolved soon, this approach argues for re-envisioning Afghanistan not as the periphery of South and Central Asia "but as a potential center or hub in its own right."<sup>11</sup> It would thus serve as the device for integrating its many neighbors through the "revival of regional and continental transport and trade."<sup>12</sup> By producing commercial gains for all, it would slowly help to erode the current zero-sum security competition between these states.

This version of the regional approach, then, consciously seeks to spotlight the "commonalities and complementarities"<sup>13</sup> that exist between a landlocked Afghanistan and its diverse neighbors. By emphasizing the need for improved regional infrastructure, it argues that Afghanistan could, for example, become the conduit for transporting natural gas and electricity between the energy-surplus states of Central Asia and their consumers in the energy-starved states of South Asia; export minerals and agricultural products to China and India while emerging as a market for their manufactures; and serve as the hub for overland trade between Central Asia and western China on one hand, and India, Iran, and Pakistan on the other. The expansion of the transportation corridors in and around Afghanistan thus permits all the regional states to benefit from the rapidly expanding Chinese and Indian economies by becoming either new sources of raw material exports to these states or new markets for their goods, or even by simply enjoying transit fees for commodities passing in any direction through their territories.

This economic approach finds ready endorsement within the Obama administration. When viewed in historical terms, it actually represents the *earliest* incarnation of the regional approach, dating back to the Bush presidency. The vision of regionalism based on economic integration was in fact what drove, at least in part, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's decision to merge the Central Asian and South Asian bureaus into a single new entity within the State Department. Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States pursued, as a conscious policy, efforts to integrate these two regions, because of the mutual political and economic benefits that would accrue

from deepened trade and energy links. Consistent with this notion, the Bush administration actively supported since 2005 a series of Regional Economic Cooperation Conferences centering on Afghanistan. These conferences, which grew out of the historic “Kabul Declaration on Good Neighborly Relations” issued in December 2002, were intended to exploit economic opportunities to enhance regional security, but their efforts invariably petered out—and for good reason.

There are two serious obstacles to consummating this “functionalist” version of the regional approach, neither of which can be overcome speedily.

The first is the need for security in Afghanistan. Without stability in Afghanistan, the investments required to transform this landlocked country into a major trans-regional transportation hub will simply not materialize because the risks to all assets created, from whatever source, would be extraordinarily high. In other words, the means required—investible resources—to produce the goal desired—Afghanistan as a nucleus of regional cooperation—cannot be secured without that end existing to begin with. This persistent conundrum has continually frustrated all efforts to realize the otherwise laudable objective of regional integration.

The second obstacle is just as significant as the first. The unspoken assumption that underlies the regional approach based on economic integration is that all states, no matter what their political differences, can profit from the gains from trade. A steady accumulation of such gains would provide enough incentives for all the warring competitors to mute their rivalries or at least to hold them in sufficient check to avoid disrupting the benefits accruing from trade and transit. In other words, regional competitors would value the absolute gains arising from economic intercourse over and above the relative gains associated with their political rivalries.

Unfortunately, this assumption is both heroic and untrue. The evidence thus far suggests that at least one critical state, Pakistan, has consistently valued its security-driven relative gains far more than any absolute gains emerging from enhanced regional trade. Consequently, here too, the desired goal of regional integration has been unfailingly

stymied because Islamabad's fears about its political interests being subverted as a result of the increased prosperity accruing to others—even if Pakistan itself flourishes in the process—have prevented it from cooperating in the manner that the votaries of economic integration imagine it should.

When considered on balance, there appear to be four different conceptions of the “regional approach” to Afghanistan populating the policy space. The Obama administration in practice has pursued some variant of each of these conceptions. At the purely operational level, the regional approach finds manifestation in the Pentagon's view of Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan as a single theater. At the level of national policy, all of Afghanistan and Pakistan are viewed, conceptually and bureaucratically, as differentiated parts of the common threat of terrorism arising from religious extremism, and American political, diplomatic, economic, and military efforts have been oriented toward harmonizing Kabul's and Islamabad's policies. At the level of international diplomacy, all stakeholders in Afghanistan are viewed as integral components of a collaborative endeavor, despite the presence of many as-yet-unresolved differences that invariably impede mutual cooperation. At the level of economic integration, all the South and Central Asian states are perceived as potentially part of an integrated regional trade and transit system, although the administration has not yet found the magic solution that would enable it to circumvent the constraints to realizing such a vision.

While different conceptions of the regional approach have thus been present in U.S. policy for a long time, with some primitive incarnations actually predating Obama's elevation to the presidency, the calls for a reinvigorated commitment to newer forms of the regional approach have now grown in urgency. In large part, this is because of fears that even President's Obama's latest decision to commit more troops to Afghanistan will fail to stem the deterioration in that country if the underlying failures of regional cooperation are not rectified. The persistent clamor for a regional approach thus seems to be born—and periodically reborn—from a frustration that “inside-out” solutions may still fail in Afghanistan. As fixing the problems in Afghanistan has been



perplexing American policy makers over the last decade, the temptation to fix the myriad problems outside it—in order to resolve the challenges within—appears beguiling and occurs recurrently. Whether such an “outside-in” approach will succeed remains to be seen, but its appeal ultimately derives from the hope that if Afghanistan cannot be transformed in a way that mitigates regional competition, regional cooperation might become the avenue for procuring success in Afghanistan. Stated in more positive terms, the general logic for revisiting the regional approach, perhaps through the involvement of a smaller number of truly critical neighbors, is based on the belief that if these key states—both those that border Afghanistan and those that directly impact its security—can be convinced to support certain minimum common goals in regard to counterterrorism, reconstruction, and governance, coalition operations in Afghanistan stand a better chance of success.

## EXAMINING NATIONAL GOALS IN AFGHANISTAN

The best way to test the above premise is to examine whether a “regional approach,” involving mainly Afghanistan’s neighbors and other critical influentials, could in fact produce an effective consensus on key issues important to the coalition. In this context, perhaps the first condition for the success of any regional approach would be some minimal convergence between the aims of the regional states and U.S. and Afghan goals in Afghanistan. For purposes of simplicity, two assumptions are introduced into the analysis: first, U.S. and Afghan goals are assumed to be largely identical; second, it is assumed that the state of Afghanistan is a unitary actor (that is, there are no differences between the interests of the current Karzai regime and the Afghan nation as a whole). The validity of both these assumptions is questionable, especially the second. But as the purpose of the exercise here is mainly to survey the degree of convergence between regional and U.S. interests, the internal differences between Washington and Kabul, and the divergence between Karzai’s interests and those of his country—while

significant—can be treated as less relevant, at least provisionally. Consequently, despite the important differences between current U.S. and Afghan goals and the reality of divergent interests within Afghanistan, this section speaks of “Afghanistan” and its interests in the singular for simplicity of exposition and treats “U.S. goals” as subsuming Afghan national goals as well.

The United States today pursues eight distinctive goals in Afghanistan:

- Eliminating al-Qaeda, or at least its international leadership and cadres bivouacked in Afghanistan or its borderlands
- “Defeating” the Taliban to a sufficient degree at least to prevent its return to power in Kabul by force
- Fostering a minimally effective central state in Afghanistan that is both moderate in political orientation and capable of controlling its territory
- Encouraging Afghan-Pakistani political reconciliation, or at least the semblance of a working partnership
- Sustaining the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan in order to ensure the viability of the war-torn country
- Positioning Afghanistan as a trade and transit corridor between Central and South Asia
- Limiting narcotics production in, and its distribution from, Afghanistan
- Combating the spread of illegal trafficking in weapons, organized crime, and Taliban ideology from Afghanistan

Although these objectives are rarely listed exhaustively, the totality of American policies pursued in Afghanistan since the Bush administration suggests that this iteration represents a good facsimile of the goals currently sought by Washington through its political, military, diplomatic, and economic investments within the country.

Table 1 maps the goals of Pakistan, India, Iran, the Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), Saudi Arabia, China, Russia, and Western troop-contributing coalition partners vis-à-vis the U.S. goals in Afghanistan listed above. The intersection of these goals is assessed along a spectrum based on a country's real, as opposed to its professed, interests. The spectrum ranges from "strongly convergent" (when the goals of the concerned regional state and those of the United States are fundamentally identical) to "moderately-to-weakly convergent" (when a regional state shares, but not intensely, a common goal with the United States) to "ambivalent" (when a regional state is conflicted about a goal pursued by the United States) to "opposed" (when a regional state is at odds with the United States) to "indifferent" (when a regional state is basically unconcerned about a particular U.S. goal or its realization). If a country's choices either do not matter substantially to the outcome, or if its choices are characterized by some special attributes, these "low impact" or "qualified" preferences, respectively, are identified in the table as well.

The assessment of various regional interests mapped in Table 1 is instructive from the viewpoint of evaluating the viability of the regional approach. To begin with, the diversity of national objectives relative to U.S. goals in Afghanistan is remarkable. All the regional states that have some impact on Afghanistan's future, and which remain the focus of analysis here, appear to pursue varied objectives—with differing degrees of intensity—that do not often cohere with American aims. An exception to this rule is India. Although India does not share a border with Afghanistan and although it influences the prospects for coalition success in this war-torn country in many ways—most importantly by its reconstruction contributions and the manner in which Pakistan perceives those activities in Afghanistan—it remains a welcome aberration in that, of all Afghanistan's neighbors, India alone pursues goals that are identical to those of the United States, almost matching it in the intensity of convergence. Where national goals are concerned, India's limitations stem mainly from its economic constraints, which prevent it from doing more to support Washington's efforts in Afghanistan; moreover,

**Table 1: Analysis of National Goals**

	Eliminating al-Qaeda	"Defeating" the Taliban and preventing its return to power by force	Building an effective central Afghan state	Encouraging Afghan-Pakistani reconciliation	Sustaining economic reconstruction of Afghanistan	Positioning Afghanistan as trade and transit corridor	Limiting narcotics production in Afghanistan	Combating spread of Taliban ideology from Afghanistan
Pakistan	✓✓✓	☞ → x	x	✓✓✓	✓*	☞ → x	✓✓✓	✓*
India	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓*	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Iran	✓✓✓	✓✓✓*	✓✓✓ → ✓	✓ → ☐	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
CARs	✓✓✓	✓*	✓✓✓*	☐	✓✓✓*	✓✓✓*	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Saudi Arabia	✓✓✓	☞ → x	☞ → ☐	✓✓✓	✓	☐	☐	x
China	✓✓✓	✓*	☐	✓*	✓	☐ → ✓	✓*	✓✓✓*
Russia	✓✓✓	✓✓✓*	✓✓✓*	☐	✓✓✓*	☐ → ☞ → ✓	✓✓✓*	✓✓✓
Coalition	✓✓✓	✓ → ☞	✓ → ☞	✓✓✓*	✓✓✓	✓✓✓*	✓✓✓	✓✓✓

**Key:** Strongly convergent ✓✓✓ Moderately-to-Weakly Convergent ✓ Ambivalent ☞ Opposed x Indifferent ☐  
 Low Impact or Qualified Preference \*

the absence of a common border with Afghanistan and the lack of transit rights through Pakistan (because of Islamabad's unremitting competition with New Delhi) encumber India's efforts to further aid the United States in the stabilization mission.

Ironically, Iran comes closest to India where the symmetry of national goals is concerned. Iranian goals in Afghanistan mostly cohere with the eight objectives pursued by the United States. Iran remains opposed to both al-Qaeda and the Taliban; is deeply engaged in reconstruction activities in Afghanistan and supports an expanded Afghan role in regional trade and transit; and benefits overwhelmingly from the control of narcotics production in Afghanistan and the defeat of the Taliban's ideology. In general, stability in Afghanistan advances Iranian interests in many ways. Hence, it is not surprising that on several key issues Iran's aims converge with those of the United States—in principle. Yet Tehran's other problems with Washington—manifested through its expanding nuclear program, its support for extremist groups worldwide, its intransigent opposition to Israel, and its drive for regional influence—have resulted in tactically subversive actions against the Western coalition in Afghanistan that undermine the noteworthy convergence in goals that otherwise obtains. Iran's conflicted behaviors also undermine the prospects for creating an effective state in Afghanistan: although Tehran recognizes that a successful regime in Kabul would greatly improve its own security, its pessimism that current coalition operations will produce such an outcome has resulted in its continued cultivation of key sub-national clients, thus further undermining the chances of building a competent central authority in Afghanistan.

Pakistan, the most critical U.S. ally in the war in Afghanistan and one of Afghanistan's most important direct neighbors, pursues far more divergent aims relative to Washington (and Kabul) than the high American dependence on Pakistan would lead one to assume. Although both Washington and Islamabad have gone to great lengths to publicly emphasize their shared goals in Afghanistan since 2001, a close analysis reveals deep and perhaps unbridgeable gulfs between the two countries, at least in the near term. These chasms are manifested most clearly on the core issues of high politics: defeating the Afghan Taliban and preventing

its return to power in Kabul by force, and constructing a minimally effective central state in Afghanistan.

On both these counts, Pakistan's interests differ from those of the United States. Where the first is concerned, Islamabad—or more precisely, the Pakistani military, which dominates national security decision making—views protecting the Afghan Taliban leadership and its core capabilities as essential to shielding Pakistan's westward flanks against India. Although Pakistani policy makers certainly do not prefer to see the Taliban ensconced in Kabul, as they did before—in part because the events leading up to this outcome would be quite dangerous to their own country—they nonetheless seek a government in Afghanistan that has sufficient Taliban representation because of their conviction that such a regime alone would be capable of reversing India's current influence and denying it any significant role in that country.

Islamabad also rejects the goal of building an effective central state in Afghanistan, because it fears that if such an entity comes to be dominated by secular Pashtuns, they would stymie Pakistan's goal of preventing Afghan territorial claims on its Pashtun-dominated lands. Were a competent central authority in Afghanistan to be controlled by non-Pashtun ethnic groups, the disenfranchisement of Pakistan's closest tribal allies in Afghanistan could, it is feared, leave Islamabad at a conclusive disadvantage vis-à-vis India. For these reasons, Pakistan's commitment to supporting the U.S. objective of raising a minimally effective central state in Afghanistan is suspect. The erection of an effective central state in Afghanistan would also undermine Pakistan's long-term goal of becoming the principal foreign adjudicator of Kabul's strategic choices, which—whatever its justification—ends up placing Islamabad at odds not only with the United States, India, and Iran, but also with Afghanistan itself, when the interests of the Karzai regime, the northern regions, and the non-Taliban Pashtuns are taken into account.

The discrepancy between Pakistani and American goals in Afghanistan continues in the realm of economics as well: while Washington has a strong interest in ensuring the viability of the fledgling Afghan state by restoring it to its historical position as a trade and transit corridor between Central and South Asia, Pakistan's fear of becoming

merely an appendage in the process, mainly supporting the growth of other major powers such as India, has led it to obstruct all worthwhile proposals relating to the expansion of economic intercourse across the greater South Asian region.

The foregoing summary does not by any means suggest that Pakistan and the United States are hopelessly divided on all issues: the partnership between the two countries has been particularly close on counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda and the indigenous rebellion mounted by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. The United States also continues to rely heavily on Pakistan for the transport of dry cargo for coalition military operations in Afghanistan. But, on balance, the tension between U.S. and Pakistani goals is so acute on some critical issues that it could make the difference not only to the success of U.S. operations in Afghanistan but also to the viability of any regional approach intended to induce greater cooperation within the region.

The troop-contributing partners in the Western coalition operating in Afghanistan display similarities to Pakistan in this respect. Although their economic and military contributions have been significant (and extremely valuable) in many instances, their goals often differ from Washington's in important ways, albeit because of divergent perceptions and circumstances rather than, as in Pakistan's case, conflicts of interest. The most important differences in this regard have been with respect to defeating the Taliban and, to a lesser degree, building a central state in Afghanistan. The developments at the London Conference, and even before, suggest that few of Washington's major Western troop-contributing allies have the stomach for a concerted military campaign aimed at defeating the Taliban. Rather, many Western partners—at least at the level of their political leadership—view their presence in Afghanistan as serving mainly the objective of geopolitically “coupling” with the United States, rather than providing the resources necessary to defeat the Taliban through a resolute political-military operation. This reluctance to offer up the requisite resources is often conditioned by various national judgments that the Taliban cannot be decisively defeated with means that can be realistically afforded and politically supported in the current difficult economic circumstances.

Many Western partners, accordingly, are content to advocate “reconciliation” with the Taliban leadership as a *substitute* for defeating the movement through a properly resourced counterinsurgency campaign. This contrasts with the United States, which views any reconciliation—if it can be consummated at all—as either the culmination of political-military success in the contested areas, or contingent on key conditions that the Taliban has rejected historically: renunciation of all ties with al-Qaeda; acceptance of the Afghan constitution; laying down of arms and the cessation of rebellion; and agreement to the Afghan government’s oversight of the reconciliation process.

Because of differences on these issues among coalition partners, there is also a greater willingness among some to abandon the goal of building a minimally effective central state in favor of a comprehensive decentralization that cedes the governance of some regions to the Taliban and its representatives. Again, this position is at variance with current U.S. policy, which can countenance regional governance by insurgent leaders or their representatives only *after* they have made their peace with the legitimate government in Kabul—an outcome that American policy makers and military leaders believe could materialize only as a result of a successful counterinsurgency.

The remaining states identified in Table 1 vary in their convergence with U.S. goals. Russian goals in Afghanistan, just like Iran’s, for example, are compatible with those of the United States in many ways. Unlike Iran, which happens to be one of Afghanistan’s key physical neighbors, Russia has been geographically separated from Afghanistan since the fall of the Soviet Union, and hence can afford to be unresponsive on some issues in a way that Iran cannot. But the larger similarity still holds: Moscow stands to gain considerably from the success of the United States in Afghanistan, but its larger disagreements with Washington on missile defense, NATO expansion, and control over the Caucasus; its own painful past history in Afghanistan; and its indifference or incapacity on some matters important to the United States, such as creating a successful central state or encouraging Afghan–Pakistani reconciliation, make it a less-than-effective partner for Washington. Nevertheless, Russia is just as concerned about the dangers posed by



al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the export of narcotics from Afghanistan, and the spread of Taliban ideology and other violent extremism from the greater South Asian region. As things stand today, Russia does cooperate with the Western coalition in Afghanistan, mostly by permitting NATO supplies to transit its territory. A substantial portion of NATO's fuel is sourced from Russia and uses the Russian rail network to enter Afghanistan through Central Asia; Russia also permits the transport of some nonmilitary supplies through its territory in support of International Security Assistance Force operations in Afghanistan. This cooperation, however, would have been far more extensive if the larger disagreements with Washington, and Moscow's fears about the prospect of a permanent U.S. military presence in Central Asia, had not prevented it from permitting the United States to utilize the northern distribution network into Afghanistan more fully.

Like Russia, the Central Asian Republics share many U.S. goals in Afghanistan in principle. In fact, they are strongly supportive of more U.S. goals than Russia is because of their physical proximity to Afghanistan. For example, all the Central Asian Republics yearn for successful economic reconstruction and state consolidation in Afghanistan; they remain eager to participate in its revitalization; and they savor the prospect of Afghanistan becoming one day a trade and transit corridor between Central and South Asia, among other things. The accomplishment of these objectives would advance their own interests in securing alternative southern outlets for their raw material and energy exports, and, by implication, further enlarge their autonomy vis-à-vis Russia. Because of their location adjacent to Afghanistan, these states also strongly support the U.S. goals of curbing narcotics production in Afghanistan and limiting the spread of Taliban ideology in the region. As success in Afghanistan directly affects their security, some Central Asian Republics historically offered the use of their airspace or airfields either to NATO or to some of its constituents for cargo or troop movements into Afghanistan. At least one, Kyrgyzstan, still does. Other Central Asian Republics, such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, permit the coalition to utilize their ground lines of communication to transport fuel into Afghanistan. Although these contributions

are invaluable, both their larger economic weaknesses and their neglect by the coalition, however, make them less relevant to Afghan reconstruction efforts than they should be. Moreover, the efforts of many Central Asian states—these vary depending on the country in question—to strike a balance between supporting NATO and avoiding the undue alienation of Russia limit their incentives to support the coalition more wholeheartedly. While all the Central Asian Republics clearly value the success of the U.S.-led stabilization efforts in Afghanistan and worry that a precipitative withdrawal of Western forces would be deleterious to their security, their inability to fundamentally shape these outcomes often leads to fatalism about the prospect of coalition failure in Afghanistan. Consequently, although all the region's states would benefit greatly from the defeat of the Taliban and the success of an effective Afghan state, their lack of confidence in NATO's ability to attain these ends tempts a resigned acceptance of whatever outcomes eventually materialize.

China's goals remain limited where Afghanistan is concerned. China's links with Afghanistan were tenuous historically and, like Russia, its goals in Afghanistan today often end up being at some variance with those of the United States because these interests are refracted through other concerns. In principle, China clearly stands to gain from the success of Western military operations against the Taliban, the successful raising of an effective central state in Afghanistan, and Afghan-Pakistani reconciliation. Success in these arenas could limit the dangers of extremism to China's western territories. But because China has a compelling geopolitical interest in protecting its strategic partnership with Pakistan, it has been unwilling to undercut Islamabad's core preferences on these issues. As a result, even though Chinese and U.S. aims converge where national security outcomes in Afghanistan are concerned, Beijing has been unwilling to fully act upon these interests for two reasons: first, because of its fears that American success in Afghanistan might lead to a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia, leading to the encirclement of China; second, because supporting U.S. and Afghan interests risks undermining China's critical geopolitical partnership with Pakistan. Thus, for example, Beijing has not leaned on

Islamabad to forsake the Afghan Taliban, even though many of the latter's Islamist confreres threaten Chinese security interests in Xinjiang, and the Taliban itself may eventually endanger important Chinese economic interests in Afghanistan.

Where economic goals are concerned, China has focused on investing in Afghanistan with the aim of securing access to its natural resources in order to fuel China's continued economic growth. Accordingly, China is investing heavily in copper extraction and in the transportation networks necessary to export the metal to China. This huge investment, however, has not carried over either to aiding Afghanistan's economic reconstruction more generally or to investing—through political or military means—in advancing political stability in Afghanistan. On all these matters, China has preferred to hope that the ongoing efforts of the Western coalition will bear fruit, even as it has carefully refrained from pressing its most important ally, Pakistan, to make the course corrections necessary to underwrite that success.

Saudi Arabia remains in many ways an analogue of Pakistan where its national aims in Afghanistan are concerned. At a formal level, the kingdom remains one of America's most important allies in the global war against terrorism. It also remains a partner in President Hamid Karzai's avowed efforts to integrate the Taliban into Afghanistan's political life. Despite these convergences, Saudi Arabia's Salafist ideology, which remains its *raison d'être* both politically and existentially, and the funds flowing out of numerous private charities to various extremist Islamic movements worldwide, has cast Riyadh into an ambiguous position, ranging from opposition to indifference, with regard to many U.S. objectives involving the Taliban. For example, numerous Saudi sources continue to fund the Taliban's military operations; the kingdom's ideological guardians find the Taliban's ideology eminently salutary; and various private and public Saudi organizations continue to support the spread of Salafist and Deobandi thought throughout South, Central, and Southeast Asia. As a result, the kingdom's commitment to the U.S. objectives of defeating the Taliban, constructing an ideologically moderate centralized state in Afghanistan, and preventing the spread of Taliban ideology, is questionable. The Saudi friendship with both Pakistan

and Afghanistan positions the kingdom, at least formally, as a supporter of Afghan–Pakistani reconciliation, but it is unclear whether the monarchy holds a specific view on the bitterly opposed positions of its partners. The attitudes of Saudi Arabia, then, serve as an exemplar of the positions of many of the regional states vis-à-vis U.S. goals in Afghanistan: supportive on some issues, ambivalent or indifferent on others, and opposed on the rest.

This judgment is corroborated when the analysis of national goals is conducted not by country but on the basis of the goals themselves. Here too, the results are significant. The one U.S. goal on which there is universal support among all the countries listed in Table 1 is eliminating al-Qaeda. Even if many of them cannot contribute substantially toward this end—in fact, most contribute to its achievement only indirectly—they are all agreed on the threat posed by this terrorist group of global reach. In part, this conviction is reinforced by the intensity of U.S. opposition to al-Qaeda, but it is also influenced by the fact that many of the countries concerned have been targets of attacks carried out either by al-Qaeda or its affiliates or by groups inspired by its ideology and activities. Even when this is not strictly the case, the universal opposition to al-Qaeda is understandable, because in the Westphalian system stateless groups that wield deadly instruments of coercion across national boundaries end up posing a threat to all the constituent members of that system.

Beyond the objective of eliminating al-Qaeda, however, almost every other U.S. goal pursued in Afghanistan fails to command absolute support uniformly. The two goals that come next in terms of widespread support are sustaining reconstruction in Afghanistan and limiting narcotics production there. Support for these objectives is generally high because neither of these two goals threatens the interests of any of the regional states in any significant way. Yet even here, some particularities are noteworthy. The contributions made by the Central Asian Republics and Russia to economic reconstruction in Afghanistan are modest—despite the perceived political value of Afghanistan’s economic success—largely because of the economic infirmities of these states. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China, in contrast,

simply do not view Afghanistan's economic success as a critical priority for their national interests. In the case of Pakistan, Afghanistan's economic regeneration may in fact be a source of competition (particularly in case of infrastructure developments that bypass Pakistan), but Islamabad's parlous economic condition implies that it is a bit player in any case. Where limiting narcotics production is concerned, only Saudi Arabia remains generally indifferent to this goal, but not for any malign reason. The kingdom's physical distance from the problem and the fact that it has escaped the most egregious consequences of the drug trade account for its lack of interest here. China's interests, too, weakly converge with those of the United States in regard to limiting narcotics production in Afghanistan, largely because China has avoided the worst effects of the drug trade that have affected Iran, the Central Asian Republics, and Russia more severely. Russia's contributions to dealing with this challenge, however, have been minimal largely because of both the legacy of its past intervention in Afghanistan and the low priority accorded to this issue.

The next U.S. objective in rank ordering that garners support from the regional states is combating the unwelcome negative externalities arising from the Afghan war—the illegal trafficking in weapons and the spread of organized crime. But on the crucial challenge of constraining the spread of Taliban ideology beyond Afghanistan, two significant exceptions arise. Thanks to the threats posed by radicalized Islam to its own security, Pakistan today appears to have recognized the dangers associated with the spread of the Taliban's ideology. That recognition, however, unfortunately does not yet extend to supporting the United States in defeating the Afghan Taliban as an insurgent group and as the carrier of an extremist ideology. The Pakistani effort to walk the tightrope between attempting to defeat the group's ideology while preserving the group itself is unlikely to succeed, but it could well do significant damage both to Pakistan itself and to the coalition's efforts in Afghanistan in the interim. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, appears to have the opposite problem. Despite being a strong supporter of the United States in the war against al-Qaeda—because of the threat posed by the latter to the security of the Kingdom—Riyadh views the Taliban's

Deobandi ideology quite sympathetically, and in fact continues to fund equally, if not more extreme versions, of Salafist Islam through Central and South Asia and globally. It might be an exaggeration but not without a kernel of truth to say that unlike Pakistan, Saudi Arabia cares less about the Taliban as a group than it does about its ideology. Either way, however, the contrast with U.S. interests on this issue is conspicuous.

A greater diversity of interests characterizes the other key goals pursued by the United States in Afghanistan. For example, the all-important objective of “defeating” the Taliban in some way, or at least preventing its return to power in Kabul through force of arms—the goal that currently absorbs the bulk of U.S. military, diplomatic, and economic resources in Afghanistan—does not enjoy unqualified support among Afghanistan’s neighbors. Only India, Iran, and Russia may be said to endorse U.S. aims here in their entirety—but Iran and Russia are too hobbled by ulterior constraints or weak capabilities to assist the United States. The Central Asian Republics also support the United States on this count in principle, but appear to be fearful that the coalition will be unable to vanquish the insurgency; at any rate, their own contributions toward achieving this end are modest. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, two critical U.S. allies, run the gamut from ambivalence to opposition where defeating the Taliban is concerned: although both states might have reluctantly acquiesced to this objective in the early years of the coalition campaign, both Islamabad and Riyadh today would prefer that the Taliban leadership be accommodated, even integrated into the institutions of governance in Kabul, rather than being targeted or marginalized. China and the Western coalition partners support the United States weakly on this issue or are ambivalent about it, even though the latter have made significant material contributions toward the counter-insurgency campaign.

A similar diversity of attitudes is visible regarding the creation of an effective central state in Afghanistan. India, Russia, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics support the current U.S. version of this goal, but the latter three are constrained in different ways. While Iran would like to see an effective—and moderate—central state arise in Afghanistan, thanks to its competition with the United States and its fear that the

coalition may fail eventually, Tehran aims to preserve a sphere of influence among the Afghan tribes of Iranian origin in western and northwestern Afghanistan and in the Hazara-dominated areas of the center. The Central Asian Republics, in contrast, are more spectators than shapers, either unable to advance their interests in a strong Afghan state through concerted action or choosing not to overinvest in this goal. Russia mostly defers to the United States on this matter; although strongly desiring a successful central authority in Kabul, Moscow's fears about the longevity of the current regime, coupled with its desire to preserve good relations with whatever might succeed it, has produced mainly passive support for this goal. For reasons either of incapacity or apathy, China appears indifferent to the success of an effective central state in Afghanistan, although this shows some signs of changing recently because of Beijing's growing economic investments. Whether Russian and Chinese support for this goal will become more manifest and forthcoming—particularly if the Taliban insurgency increases in intensity—remains to be seen. Among those unconvinced about the value of this goal, the European partners stand at one end with views ranging from weak support to ambivalence; Saudi Arabia appears to be somewhere in the middle, trapped between ambivalence and indifference; and Pakistan, with real interests in a relatively weak Kabul, views the creation of an effective central state in Afghanistan with at least dismay, if not outright opposition. Consistent with this view, Islamabad has been resolutely against all coalition efforts to increase the size of the Afghan National Army (and the security forces more generally), and it remains highly uncomfortable with the current Afghan constitution—which it views as disadvantaging the provinces, including those populated by conservative Pashtuns, whom Islamabad perceives as allies.

The goals of Afghan–Pakistani reconciliation and positioning Afghanistan as a trade and transit corridor also evoke different responses from the various stakeholders. While most would generally prefer to see Afghan–Pakistan reconciliation because of its benefits for closer counterinsurgency and counterterrorism cooperation, few regional states have any other direct stake in the success of this effort. Russia and the Central Asian Republics are understandably indifferent, while all

other neighbors support the goal with varying degrees of priority and enthusiasm. For most countries, this objective implicates mainly Afghanistan and Pakistan, though the remote consequences of their competition obviously affect the larger coalition. The biggest impediment to realizing this goal, ironically, is Afghanistan and Pakistan themselves. Islamabad desires reconciliation but requires Kabul to concede the legitimacy of the Durand Line as a means of conclusively settling their bilateral border dispute. Kabul might be willing to recognize the Durand Line as the formal international border, but is unlikely to do so until it is convinced that Islamabad has forsaken its ambitions of controlling Afghanistan's geopolitical direction.

The objective of transforming Afghanistan into a transit corridor evokes support based on the location of the concerned state and its prospective gains. Thus, India, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics are the strongest supporters of this objective because of the gains from trade that would eventually result. The Western coalition partners also support this objective for the same reason, though their ability to influence its realization is minimal. Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China appear indifferent to this goal presently, but this is likely to change in the case of Beijing as its "Great Western Development Strategy" matures over time. Whether Russia's position will move in the direction of weak support in the future will depend greatly on whether Moscow feels comfortable with the Central Asian Republics enjoying new outlets for trade away from the conduits that Russia currently controls. Pakistan's opposition to Afghanistan as an open trade and transit corridor is more unremitting and unlikely to change so long as its security competition with India remains unresolved to its advantage.

## CAN THE REGIONAL APPROACH TO AFGHANISTAN SUCCEED?

As the analysis of national aims in the previous section suggests, there is considerable disparity between regional interests and the objectives pursued by the United States in Afghanistan. If a deeper analysis of the



convergence between U.S. and Afghan aims themselves were undertaken, the same conclusion would again obtain: the fact that there is a considerable diversity of opinion inside Afghanistan about the coalition, its presence, and its campaign; the fact that the Karzai regime seeks to protect its power over and above contributing to domestic stability; and the fact that different political factions within Afghanistan are aligned with different regional patrons, all contribute, among other things, to the inference that U.S. and Afghan objectives too may not be perfectly aligned. These factors all undermine a regional approach. This inference suggests that implementing a regional strategy on the presumption that there exists substantial convergence between U.S. and regional goals (even if the divergence between U.S. and Afghan goals themselves is disregarded) will prove to be extremely challenging.

This judgment is corroborated by the reality that, although many of Afghanistan's direct and extended neighbors view the existence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban as critical threats to their national interests, they are often locked into various types of security competition with one another, resulting in their larger rivalries subordinating the common interest in fighting terrorism. Table 2, which lists various dyads in the greater South Asian region in terms of their competition or convergence in interests, reinforces pessimism about the success of a regional approach. The tabulation highlights the following realities that should be of concern.

First, Afghanistan and its three most important immediate neighbors, Pakistan, Iran, and India, are all locked into difficult and virtually intractable rivalries centered on Pakistan. Afghan–Pakistani relations, involving territorial claims and ethnic-demographic divides, have been difficult since the founding of the Pakistani state and are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Indian–Pakistani security competition, too, is bitter and longstanding: it originated in a territorial dispute but has now expanded into a multidimensional rivalry rooted in a pathological intermixture of fear and hatred of India in Islamabad. India's growing power relative to Pakistan, its apparently unstoppable geopolitical success, and its increasingly formidable military capabilities only deepen Pakistani resentments and provide Islamabad with further incentives to attempt to

**Table 2: Mapping Complementarity of Interests in Regard to Afghanistan**

COMPETING INTERESTS
Pakistan–Afghanistan***
Pakistan–India***
Pakistan–Iran**
Pakistan–United States***
Iran–Saudi Arabia***
Iran–United States***
CARs–Pakistan*
Russia–Pakistan*
Russia–United States**
India–China*
Russia–China*
CONVERGING INTERESTS
United States–India***
Pakistan–China***
Pakistan–Saudi Arabia***
Pakistan–United States*
India–Iran***
India–CARs**
India–Russia*
Russia–Iran*

Intensity of Competition or Convergence: High \*\*\* Moderate \*\* Low \*

destabilize India. The Pakistani military’s resulting reliance on terrorism as a means of striking at its larger and more capable neighbor complements its deliberate support for the Afghan Taliban as a means of simultaneously containing Kabul’s desire for geopolitical autonomy, limiting the traditionally close Afghan–Indian relationship, and undermining India’s substantial reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Pakistani–Iranian relations in this context have also become problematic, because

Islamabad's investments in the radical Sunni Taliban threaten Tehran's Shi'i regime and the ethnic tribes of Iranian origin in Afghanistan. While the intensity of Pakistani–Iranian competition does not match that of the Afghan–Pakistani and Pakistani–Indian rivalries, it is likely to intensify if Taliban successes in Afghanistan endure.

Second, the difficulties enveloping the core quadrangle of states—Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Iran—also implicate other countries that lie further afield, for different reasons. The U.S.–Pakistan relationship experiences significant stress with regard to the Afghan Taliban: Washington's political and military strategy is directed at defeating the group, whereas Islamabad's is oriented toward preserving it. The Taliban are also an opportunity for two different dyadic rivalries to play themselves out, albeit in conflicting ways: the intense ideological and geopolitical competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which manifests throughout the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, finds Iran strategically opposed to the Taliban in the face of Saudi sympathy for the group; but Iran's truculence vis-à-vis the United States places it in the awkward situation of becoming a tactical supporter of the Taliban merely because the insurgency serves the useful purpose of ensnaring the United States. U.S.–Russian competition mercifully does not play out with the same intensity in Afghanistan, but it does prevent Russia from supporting the American military endeavor with the wholehearted support that might otherwise have materialized. Other latent rivalries that cannot be wished away include Russian and Central Asian discomfort with Pakistan, and Russian and Indian concerns about China. Although these mutual suspicions do not dominate the politics of cooperation in Afghanistan today, they dampen the prospects for meaningful cooperation.

Third, the complexity of threat assessments with regard to Afghanistan is reflected in the fact that the many competing dyads coexist with some converging dyads as well. This, however, creates other problems of its own. For example, the United States and India have strongly convergent goals in Afghanistan. These can be summarized by the proposition that both seek a stable, viable, moderate, and independent Afghan state. This same goal, which substantially unifies India and Iran as well,

however, poses a sharp threat to Pakistan's strategic interests. As a result, Saudi Arabia and China end up supporting—with greater and lesser intensity, respectively—Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan, which are often at odds with U.S., Indian, and with qualification Iranian, interests. Consequently, even though U.S. and Pakistani aims converge in regard to defeating al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in Pakistan, they diverge considerably on the key issue of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Other complementary dyads exist in Afghanistan, such as India and the Central Asian Republics, India and Russia, and Russia and Iran, but cooperation among these pairs is neither significant nor sufficient to erase the more problematic interactions that occur among the other key states.

The intense and cross-cutting nature of the security competition among various dyads, highlighted in Table 2, affirms the critical conclusion that while Afghanistan is important to many of its neighbors, its importance usually derives from how it impacts other strategic goals. Because these goals are often competitive, the success of a regional approach is inevitably impeded. This reality is manifested by the fact that *any* action undertaken either in or with respect to Afghanistan by one state ends up affecting many others positively or negatively because of its impact on their own interests or fortunes.

Table 3 summarizes the character and intensity of the impact of various national actions on the relevant neighbors. Thus, Pakistan's counterinsurgency operations against the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan inside Pakistan yield important but moderate benefits for U.S. counterinsurgency operations inside Afghanistan. Pakistani support for other terrorist groups, such as the Haqqani network, the Hezb-i-Islami (Gulbuddin), the Afghan Taliban, and the Lashkar-e-Taiba, has a high negative impact on U.S., Afghan, Indian, and Iranian interests in different ways. Similarly, India's investments in Afghan reconstruction significantly impact U.S. and Afghan national goals in positive ways, but these same actions, though consistently encouraged by Washington, unnerve Islamabad greatly and to that extent have a highly negative impact on Pakistan. Iran's engagement with and aid to Afghanistan, currently standing at some \$280 million in reconstruction projects, may be judged as having a significant positive impact on Kabul's

**Table 3: Assessing Impact of National Actions in Afghanistan**

	POSITIVE IMPACT	NEGATIVE IMPACT
PAKISTAN	United States**	United States*** Afghanistan*** India*** Iran***
INDIA	United States*** Afghanistan***	Pakistan***
IRAN	Afghanistan*** India***	United States** Pakistan**
CARs	Afghanistan*	
SAUDI ARABIA	Afghanistan*	Iran*** India***
CHINA	Afghanistan***	India*
RUSSIA	Afghanistan**	Pakistan*
COALITION PARTNERS	Afghanistan***	

Intensity of Competition or Convergence: High \*\*\* Moderate \*\* Low \*

fortunes. Tehran's willingness to oppose the Taliban's return to power and its willingness to provide India with physical access to Afghanistan yields positive benefits to both Kabul and New Delhi. By that very measure, however, Iranian actions end up having a moderately negative impact on Pakistan. Similarly, its efforts to simultaneously support some Taliban military operations against the coalition have a moderately negative impact on the United States.

All the other states' actions characterized in Table 3, insofar as they pertain directly to their other peers and to Afghanistan, amplify the general point: even if there is some disagreement about how precisely various national actions in Afghanistan are to be characterized, both in terms of their impact on others and the intensity of such impact, the fact remains that *all* national actions have diverse impacts on different stakeholders, some positive and others negative, with varying intensity. That the critical actions of key states happen to undermine, in many cases, the interests of other important partners—as reflected in this table—provides the final reason for skepticism that a regional approach to Afghanistan is likely to succeed in the near term.

This essay underscores that, although many states are relevant to the success of a regional approach in Afghanistan, some states matter more than others. Clearly, the choices, decisions, and actions of Pakistan, India, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are especially pertinent. Islamabad's political behavior toward Afghanistan and India undoubtedly remains the most problematic element undermining the regional approach, but even Pakistan's actions matter less than the decisions made by the most important player of all, the United States. The weight of U.S. power and the extent of Washington's commitment to Afghanistan remain the critical boundary conditions that define the prospects for whether Kabul's neighbors can be motivated to contribute to the success of a regional approach. The evidence is overwhelming that, left to their own devices, the exigencies of local security competition will dominate national decision making and prevent the cooperation necessary to make the regional approach successful.

President Obama's decision to identify a date for beginning the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan has perhaps driven the final nail in the coffin of what were already, for all the structural reasons laid out here, debilitating infirmities in the regional strategy. Whatever the domestic political considerations that led up to it, all of Afghanistan's neighbors, and many others, read the president's November 25, 2009, speech—despite its subsequent qualifications—as signaling the beginning of an American exit from the region. Consequently, all of them have since begun preparations to protect their national interests in the aftermath of a U.S. military withdrawal. These actions, far from presaging the cooperation necessary for the success of a regional approach, could well prove its conclusive undoing. Thus, it is ironic that the Obama administration, which has been the biggest champion of the regional approach to resolving the conundrums in Afghanistan, has inadvertently done the most to undermine its prospects for accomplishment.

Given that the auguries of the regional approach were never particularly encouraging to begin with—except at the purely operational level of war (the first conception of the regional approach discussed in the first section)—the incongruence of various national goals relative to those of the United States in Afghanistan, the existence of important cross-cutting rivalries among the regional influentials, and the

corrosive impact of many national actions in Afghanistan all combine to undermine the regional approach, whether at the level of national policy or international diplomacy or economic integration. Given this reality, U.S. policy could move in the direction of either jettisoning the regional approach or continuing to hold on to it mainly as a slogan, while seeking to mitigate its deficiencies by encouraging limited economic integration wherever possible even as it pursues concerted bilateral engagement with the relevant states. The United States should invest resources in deepening regional economic integration, no matter how modest or partial the gains may be initially. There is in fact a strong case to be made for Washington using its significant assistance programs as well as the power of multilateral lending institutions to foster more intense trade and transit linkages between Central and South Asia—even against the opposition of recalcitrant states.

Washington should approach the issue of bilateral engagement, however, more carefully. If this effort comes to focus on conflict resolution, it is unlikely to be any more successful in the future than it has been in the past. Failure in this instance is not because Washington has lacked the interest or attention, but rather because the strategic interests of Afghanistan's key neighbors, especially Pakistan, are obdurate and beyond the capability of the United States to refashion, especially in circumstances where Washington is widely viewed as preparing to exit the region. Given such perceptions, attempting to recast the goals and strategies of Afghanistan's neighbors by investing in resolving the major underlying conflicts between them is unlikely to pay off. While this approach would be consistent with the president's early instincts and with the sentiments of many within his administration to this day, it would also be hazardous and uncertain—at least within the timelines that Obama himself has established for the realistic demonstration of success in Afghanistan. If the administration nonetheless chooses to embark upon this course, it would be gambling on the proposition that resolving the more intractable and vicious problem of regional conflict remains the best way to address the narrower challenge embodied by a Taliban insurgency that operates with Pakistani support.

## CONCLUSION

The logic of pursuing a regional approach in Afghanistan is faultless—in principle. If Afghanistan's neighbors, both those that border it and those that directly impact its security, could collaborate to advance the international coalition's core objectives in regard to counterterrorism, reconstruction, and state-building, the prospects for success would immeasurably increase. When the national aims, perceptions, and actions of Afghanistan's many neighbors are carefully assessed, however, the effective consensus necessary to support the coalition's larger political and military goals seems to lie beyond reach.

The conventional wisdom about why the regional approach in Afghanistan has not succeeded thus far attributes the failure mainly to the incompatible prioritization of various national goals that transcend Afghanistan. Thus, it is often argued that all the states in the greater South Asian region actually desire a stable and successful Afghanistan, but competing national priorities beyond Afghanistan usually get in the way. Consequently, Afghanistan, in effect, becomes a sideshow where, despite the general desire for cooperation, other bilateral disputes invariably take priority. This explanation for the ineffectiveness of the regional approach is not wrong but it is incomplete.

As this essay suggests, the regional approach to Afghanistan—understood as an effort to incorporate all of Kabul's major neighbors into a cooperative enterprise led by the United States, and aimed at stabilizing Afghanistan through successful counterterrorism, reconstruction, and state-building—is unlikely to succeed, first and foremost, because the key regional stakeholders have diverging objectives *within* Afghanistan. Thus, although these states claim to want success for Afghanistan, their specific goals often do not cohere either with U.S. and Afghan aims or the objectives sought by others within Afghanistan itself. This fundamental problem is exacerbated by the realities of local security competition, which then position other states as bigger challenges to be managed relative to securing what are notionally common goals in Afghanistan. Given these two sets of problems—the diverging national objectives within Afghanistan itself and, further,



the competition between various states that takes priority over achieving common goals inside Afghanistan—it is not surprising to find a third tribulation that bedevils the regional approach: namely, that various national actions, even when well-intentioned, generate problematic consequences that only further deepen the extant regional rivalries. That the United States, too, pursues competing political interests vis-à-vis these regional states, which has the effect of stymieing their cooperation on Afghanistan, does not help matters either. Altogether, these realities do not bode well for President Obama’s interest in regional engagement, particularly if the latter comes to dominate the imperatives of doing the right things *within* Afghanistan.

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### NOTES

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