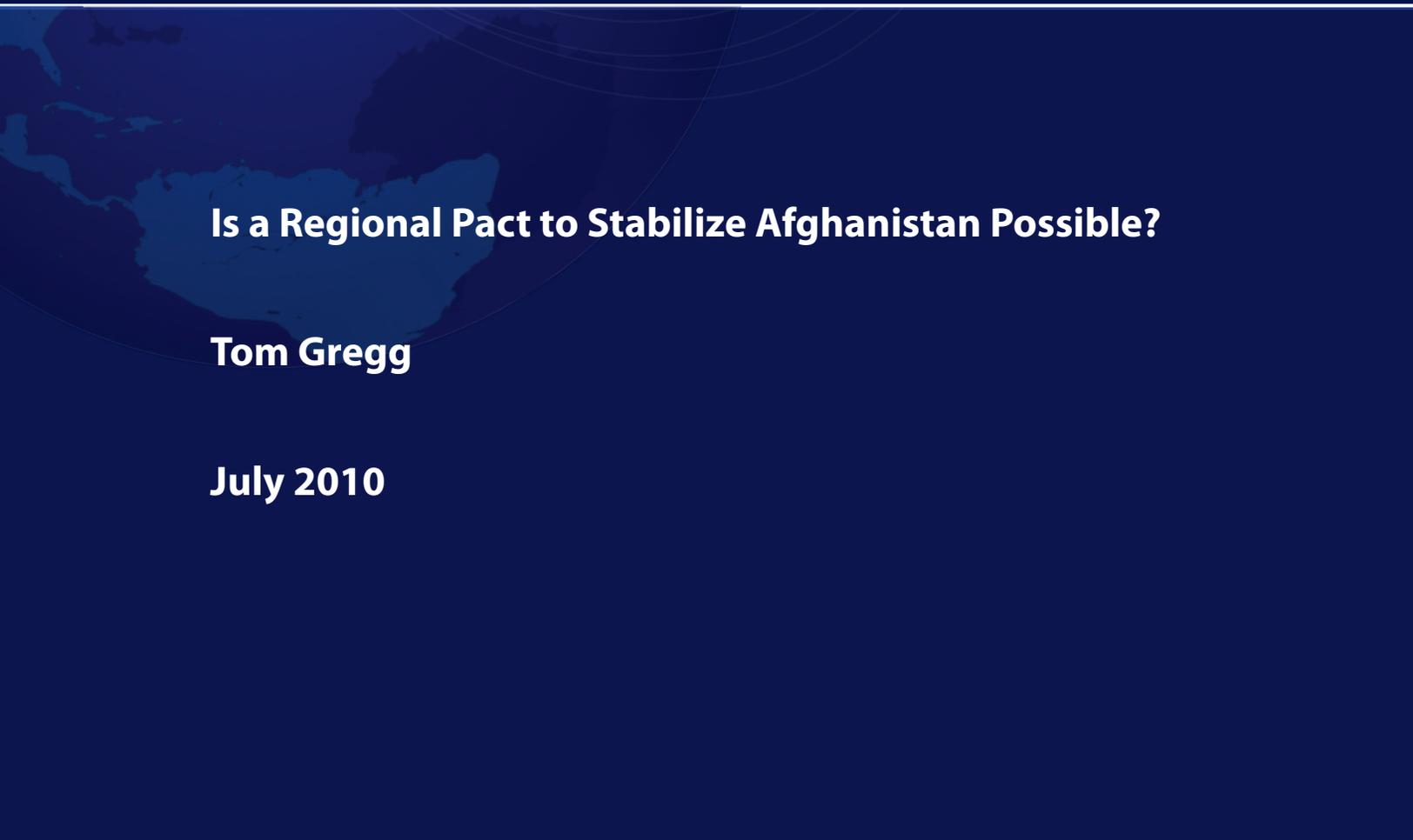




NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



Is a Regional Pact to Stabilize Afghanistan Possible?

Tom Gregg

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The world faces old and new security challenges that are more complex than our multilateral and national institutions are currently capable of managing. International cooperation is ever more necessary in meeting these challenges. The NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC) works to enhance international responses to conflict, insecurity, and scarcity through applied research and direct engagement with multilateral institutions and the wider policy community.

CIC's programs and research activities span the spectrum of conflict insecurity, and scarcity issues. This allows us to see critical inter-connections and highlight the coherence often necessary for effective response. We have a particular concentration on the UN and multilateral responses to conflict.

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Background and Context

At the London Conference on Afghanistan held on January 28, 2010, the government of Afghanistan and the international community stated that regionally owned and steered initiatives stood the best chance of success.¹ President Karzai and President Obama echoed that theme during the former's May 2010 visit to Washington – their joint statement “underscored the importance of regional cooperation in promoting regional security and in combating illicit financial, criminal, and terrorist networks.”²

The inherent challenges of cooperation in such an environment are compounded by the nature of today's Afghan state, a fragile and fractured unit after over thirty years of armed conflict. Furthermore, the region itself has changed. Afghanistan confronts not only its own dearth of technical capacity and political consensus, but also the fractious and conflict-ridden polities of its neighbors.

The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has thus far failed to establish security in the face of a growing insurgency. While these forces may prevent a relapse into even worse civil war and deter the most overt forms of regional interference, they also foster mistrust over possible ulterior strategic intentions of great powers in the region. The inability of the United States and ISAF to accomplish their stated goals has raised suspicions among Afghans about what long-term objectives the United States has for the country.

For Afghanistan, the relative success of standing up the Afghan National Army (ANA) is largely overshadowed by the shortcomings of other elements of the government – the police force and the justice system in particular. Moreover, projections of the size of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) needed to maintain stability under current levels of threat exceed what the country's economy can sustain.

In this challenging context, with the objectives of “increased regional cooperation and more effective international partnership” articulated in London as a backdrop,

this report summarizes conclusions of the chair from two meetings convened by the Center on International Cooperation at New York University and made possible by the generous support of the government of Norway. The theme of the conference held in Dubai in July 2009 was “Afghanistan in a Regional Context”; the one held in Istanbul in January 2010 focused on “International Guarantees for the Stabilization of Afghanistan”. The meetings convened academics, subject matter experts, and former government and United Nations officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, India, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Norway, and the United States. The meetings discussed the themes of multilateral guarantees, political settlement, security, and regional cooperation.

This report seeks to map some of the contours of the various threat perceptions of stakeholders and analyze how these perceptions affect the possibility of developing an international framework for stabilizing Afghanistan. It outlines recommendations made by various participants in the meetings, not all of them mutually consistent or unanimous, and proposes some ideas on how to navigate a way forward. The report does not represent the views of the participants in the meeting or the government of Norway.

The following questions guided the discussions:

What international framework or architecture would best stabilize Afghanistan and its surrounding regions? Should Afghanistan be neutralized in some sense? Should it join overlapping alliance and security training agreements, or abstain from any such ties? What strategic alternatives are available for Afghanistan?

What might a political settlement look like, as a process and an outcome? What are the red lines of the major stakeholders regarding a political settlement in Afghanistan? Can international actors support a political process in Afghanistan that both stabilizes the country internally and provides required guarantees to international stakeholders?

In the days of long-distance overland trade (the Silk Route), the territories of today's Afghanistan used to be the land

bridge of Asia. Afghanistan lost this role as sea trade expanded and the country became an isolated buffer state. The Afghan government has articulated revival of the country's role as a conduit among surrounding regions as a central objective of its foreign policy. What types of regional economic cooperation might be feasible and most likely to contribute to regional stability and cooperation?

Key Findings

- Afghanistan requires international guarantees for its own stability and for the stability of the region. While the limitations on Afghanistan's sovereignty implied by the term "neutralization" may not be acceptable, agreements and understandings addressing major interests are essential. Any guarantees would have to address a large range of threat perceptions and would need to be based on the following broad objectives: (1) minimizing threats to foreign nations emerging from Afghan soil; (2) minimizing threats to Afghanistan emerging from foreign soil; and (3) developing mutually beneficial relationships between Afghanistan and its neighbors.
- The international community supports the Afghan government's proposal for reintegration of low- to mid-level insurgent fighters. There is less unity of support for President Karzai's call for reconciliation based on negotiations with Taliban leadership, which would require the support of Pakistan. Some stakeholders both inside and outside Afghanistan maintain that achieving such a political settlement is neither necessary nor possible; those who agree on it as a goal differ on who should sponsor or lead the process. Agreement on the acceptable means and ends of such an agreement depends on developing a consensus on the long-term acceptable and sustainable role of Afghanistan in the region.
- The economic development of Afghanistan and its integration into the licit regional and global economies is a vital component of its stabilization. While there are several economic initiatives that, in the long term, could integrate Afghanistan into the regional economy, competition among infrastructural plans that benefit different states pose obstacles to the realization of such

objectives. Currently, regional organizations lack the necessary political capacity to build trust and harmonize interests in the sphere of economic development.

- Security arrangements must underpin any stabilization architecture. Afghanistan faces fateful choices among alternatives of relying on relatively distant great powers in the hope of achieving more autonomy with respect to its neighbors or making politically difficult choices about how far to accommodate neighbors' interests, especially Pakistan's. Such choices exist in several areas, including the training, equipping, financing, and recruitment of the security forces; relations with third countries; and cross-border ethnic issues. Ultimately the choice of a future path depends not on technical or military choices but on the strategic identity that Afghanistan agrees upon with its neighbors.
- A framework is needed that fosters well-coordinated regional diplomacy with U.S. involvement (along with continuing military and other actions). Without such a framework, a process of Afghanistan rapprochement with Pakistan, combined with reconciliation with the Taliban, would set off alarms in parts of the region. A possible approach would be a neutral third party convening discussions in informal settings.

Interests & Threat Perceptions In the Region

Among the circulating proposals for the long-term stabilization of Afghanistan through a multilateral diplomatic process are those for "neutralization" of the country, the creation of contact groups, strategic partnerships, defense alliances, political settlement of various conflicts, economic cooperation agreements, pipeline networks, and trade agreements.³

The rationale for the "neutralization" proposal is that competition and conflict among states, as well as overt and covert interventions, have escalated the domestic conflicts of Afghanistan into a series of wars that cannot be resolved domestically. Many of those interventions have aimed at shaping or limiting the possible configurations of political

power in the Afghan state in the interest of one or more outside powers. "Neutralization" would result from an agreement among major regional and global powers not to use the country against others and by Afghanistan not to align itself against others. Afghanistan, however, may reject this proposal as an imposed limitation on its sovereignty; its government may prefer to rely on guarantees from the United States based on a strategic partnership rather than a neutrality agreement. In addition, neutrality could be enforced and verified more easily in an era of conventional interstate warfare; enforcement and verification in an age of covert warfare and transnational networks are far harder.

The format for any regional process is itself a political issue. Pakistan objects that India is not a "neighbor" of Afghanistan and tries to exclude it from forums dealing with the latter, but India regards Afghanistan as a part of South Asia, a region in which India sees itself as predominant. (In addition, Gilgit-Baltistan, a territory of Pakistan to which India has never relinquished its claim as part of Kashmir, borders on Afghanistan.) India similarly claims that China is not part of South Asia.

Several countries wish to have a role in Afghanistan primarily as a function of their relationship (cooperative or antagonistic) with the United States. Among states and entities not contiguous to Afghanistan, the United States, the United Kingdom, NATO, the EU, Russia, India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Japan, South Korea, and potentially others have significant interests.

First and foremost, any guarantees would have to address a large range of perceived threats. Mapping these threat perceptions and claims of respective stakeholders, without passing judgment on their validity, may help identify converging interests and disputes that need to be resolved or managed:

Afghanistan's concerns:

- o The lack of clarity of purpose of the international presence in Afghanistan, its level of commitment, and its inability thus far to insulate Afghanistan from regional pressures.
- o Pakistan's (and other neighbors') wish to define zones of influence inside Afghanistan and even place limits on the composition of the central government.
- o The need to secure transit trade rights through the territories of Iran and Pakistan to the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and India.
- o A belief that Pakistan keeps the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and other border territories ungoverned, armed, and unstable as a staging ground for actions aimed at pressuring Afghanistan.
- o Its neighbors' use of joint water resources to Afghanistan's disadvantage.
- o Its lack of regulated access to the regional labor market, which drives many of its people into illegal migration and informal economic arrangements that weaken the state.

The United States' concerns:

- o The threat posed by al-Qaeda. President Obama has declared that the U.S. "core goal" in the region is "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan."
- o A potentially nuclear Indo-Pakistan war or the capture of nuclear materials by terrorists.
- o Potential overthrow or collapse of the government of Afghanistan.
- o Pakistan's use of terrorism integrated into its security doctrine as an asymmetrical force to counter threats from India or the United States.

Pakistan's concerns:

- o The regional context in which it is outweighed by India according to every measure.
- o The Indian presence in Afghanistan, which it charges includes support for anti-Pakistan forces in Kabul, covert action in support of Baluch nationalists, and a base for intelligence and other operations.
- o Indian-Iranian cooperation to open Afghanistan to trade via the Persian Gulf, thus lessening Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan.
- o A long-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan, ultimately allied with India, which will seek to weaken Pakistan or even deprive it of its nuclear weapons.
- o The need for much more hydroelectric power, which increases conflict with India and Afghanistan over Indus waters.
- o Afghanistan's claim not to recognize the Durand Line as an international border and its past claims on "Pashtunistan" and other policies of the Afghan state that affect the Pashtun population of Pakistan.

Iran's concerns:

- o A long-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan that may serve as a base for destabilization of Iran and attempts at "regime change" or attacks on Iran's nuclear program.
- o The growth of Sunni extremism (al-Qaeda and Taliban) in both Afghanistan and Pakistan that may threaten Iran, including through Baluch groups such as Jundullah.
- o Instability and drug trafficking based in Afghanistan threatening social order in Iran.
- o U.S. attempts to build oil and gas pipeline and distribution networks that bypass Iran while undermining its energy industry with sanctions, including through Afghanistan.

- o The worsening security in Afghanistan affecting the rate of return of Iran's million-plus population of Afghan refugees.

India's concerns:

- o Pakistan's use of Sunni extremist groups such as Lashkar-i Tayba, which are in turn linked to al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, for terrorist and military attacks against Indian targets, including training and mobilization of such groups in areas under the control of the Taliban.
- o A potential U.S. deal with Pakistan to return to "sub-contracting" Afghan policy to the ISI and Pakistan military, under which Pakistan would eliminate or control groups that threaten the United States directly but would continue to support and deploy those that threaten India.
- o Continued or increased Afghan dependence on Pakistan for trade and security, increasing Pakistan's leverage and ability to use Afghan land, resources, and personnel as strategic depth against India.
- o A strategic victory for terrorism and Islamic extremism, represented, for instance, by even a limited political comeback of the Taliban, which would radicalize some Muslims in both India and neighboring countries.

Saudi Arabia's concerns:

- o Cooperation between Taliban and al-Qaeda in maintaining a territorial base for al-Qaeda, which has become a direct threat to Saudi Arabia, leading to an agenda of separating Taliban from al-Qaeda.
- o Possible future U.S. reorientation toward Iran in Afghanistan and elsewhere as a result of the convergence of interests in opposing Sunni extremism and lessening Afghan dependence on Pakistan.
- o Increased influence by Iran in Afghanistan and the region.

Russia's concerns:

- o Sunni extremism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or elsewhere gaining a strategic victory and spreading into Central Asia, the Caucasus, or the Russian Federation itself.
- o The U.S. NATO presence in Afghanistan becoming permanent and providing a rationale for bases in Central Asia, placing NATO and the United States closer to Russia and to Central Asian energy supplies and providing a pole of attraction for some Central Asian states away from Russia.
- o The United States drawing Central Asia away from dependence on Russia through pipeline, trade route, and defense arrangements centered on U.S.-dominated Afghanistan.
- o Drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan threatening the social order in Russia.

China's concerns:

- o Its need to keep Pakistan as one of only a few traditional allies.
- o The instability of Pakistan and the related risk of Indo-Pakistan war, which would threaten its "peaceful rise" in Asia.
- o U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, possibly meant to contain China, providing a threat to western China and to China's connectivity to the energy supplies of the Caucasus, Iran, and Central Asia and raw materials in Afghanistan.
- o Its economy's need for the raw materials available in Afghanistan.
- o The recruitment and training of Uighur or other separatists in the jihadi facilities in Pakistan, especially FATA.

Turkey's concerns:

- o Expanding and strengthening its alliance with the United States.
- o Maintaining stability and a favorable environment for Turkish business and diplomacy to the east, including in the Caucasus, Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.

Political Settlement

At the London Conference, the international community "welcomed the government of Afghanistan's commitment to reinvigorate Afghan-led reintegration efforts by developing and implementing an effective, inclusive, transparent, and sustainable national Peace and Reintegration Program".⁴ A reintegration program would seek to reintegrate Taliban foot soldiers. A new directorate, under the Office of the President, would be tasked with leading such an initiative. Called the Directorate for Peace and Reconciliation, the proposal has the support of the international community, with funding to the directorate already reported to be in excess of 500 million USD (and possibly up to 1 billion USD).⁵

On the other hand, political settlement, as noted above, would require a reconciliation effort focused on negotiations with Taliban leaders. Such an effort does not enjoy unanimous support within the international community or in Afghanistan itself. Trying to calm some fears, Karzai assured the London Conference that in pursuing peace and reconciliation "the rights of Afghan men and women enshrined in our Constitution will never be compromised."⁶

Different parts of the international community view this process differently. In his joint statement with President Karzai, President Obama stated on May 12, 2010, that the "United States pledged its support for Afghanistan's reintegration and reconciliation processes, which allow an honorable place in society to those who cut ties with al-Qaeda, cease violence against the Afghan state, and accept the Afghan Constitution, including its protections of human rights and women's equality."⁷ The United States

has yet to articulate a policy on political settlement beyond these red lines, but its strategic objectives may be served by reaching an internal political agreement between the government of Afghanistan and at least part of the Taliban; the role of Mullah Umar, who made the decision not to turn over the suspected perpetrators of 9/11, is a particularly sensitive issue for the United States. And the United States would not support a process that polarized Afghan society or the region and thereby contributed to further destabilization. Secretary Clinton's recent statement that the U.S. strategic partnership would endure "long after the last combatant has laid down his arms" did much to boost Afghan confidence to lead a reconciliation effort.⁸

As Pakistan sees the end game approaching, the military has clearly reasserted control of the policy. The Pakistani military continues to see the Afghan Taliban, especially the Haqqani network based in North Waziristan, as a strategic asset, and is trying to use its presence to its advantage in its dealings with the governments of Afghanistan, the United States, and India. Pakistan opposes discussions with Taliban without its participation, such as those held in Saudi Arabia. General Ashfaq Kayani, chief of army staff, has reversed years of Pakistani denial of Taliban presence by offering to help deliver the Afghan Taliban to a political settlement that respects what the military defines as Pakistan's security interests.

India, Russia, and Iran have largely opposed reconciliation, which they fear may mean the Taliban coming back through a power-sharing arrangement. The United States claims that Iran provides selective support for commanders who harass U.S. and NATO troops, mainly as a signal to the United States that Iran will not tolerate a hostile presence on its borders, but, overall, Iran supports the Afghan government and plays a relatively constructive role (with a focus on the economic development of western Afghanistan, counter-narcotics, refugees, and the protection and representation of Shi'a Afghans). Iran could, however, easily escalate its disruption should it perceive that a political settlement meant the return of a U.S.-Saudi-Pakistan front against Iran.

As for Russia, despite its agreement for the first time to remove five former Taliban members from the UN SCR 1267 sanctions list on January 26 of this year, it has been officially opposed to any accommodation with militants. (It treats Taliban and al-Qaeda as an inseparable common threat). India has for years taken a similar position, but, in view of its close relations with both the United States and the government of President Karzai, it appears to have softened at least its public posture. It does not openly oppose President Karzai's plans, while it remains very concerned that the United States may cease pressure on Pakistan and its client groups over LeT and other anti-Indian groups as long as those groups separate themselves from al-Qaeda's explicit anti-U.S. agenda.

Saudi Arabia's position on reconciliation is motivated primarily by its desire to eliminate al-Qaeda sanctuaries. Hence, while it sees reconciliation as easing the way for the Taliban into the government of Afghanistan it continues to demand that the Taliban publicly denounce al-Qaeda as a precondition.

Premature as it may be to speculate, for the international community, achieving even a partial political settlement would pave the way for a reduction in the presence of foreign forces and a transition of security responsibility to the ANSF. In reality, beyond agreement that the development and implementation of a political settlement process must be Afghan-led, there has been little discussion of a role for the international community. The international community can help facilitate an environment that is conducive to a political settlement process, and the January 2010 removal of five individuals from the 1267 sanctions list was a small step in that direction. Only the United States and NATO can make and implement decisions on the redeployment of international forces. Beyond listing general red lines, the United States has not yet articulated how its strategic objectives would be affected by an internal political agreement between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. The United States has not yet offered the support that a negotiation independent of Pakistan would require. Pakistan has not clarified how expansively it will define the national interests that it wants protected in any Afghan settlement in which it plays a central role.

The extent of Pakistan's demands may determine whether such a settlement is feasible and how much backlash there may be against it by Afghans and other neighbors.

Finally, how the United Nations (and international community more broadly) approaches the issue of political settlement will play a part in: (1) establishing the requisite confidence-building measures and (2) shaping a possible mediating role for the UN in the future. To this end, the UN Secretary-General, through his Special Representative in Afghanistan (perhaps with the support of the Organization for the Islamic Conference), should play a more vocal role in speaking the "language of peace" and articulating peace and stability for the benefit of the people of Afghanistan as a central goal.

Economic Settlement

There are several economic initiatives that, in the long term, could potentially integrate Afghanistan into the regional economy and strengthen its national development. These initiatives include: a permanent transit trade agreement with Pakistan and possible extension to permit overland trade to India; developing hydroelectric power in the Pamirs of Tajikistan and the neighboring regions of Kyrgyzstan for transmission southward to Afghanistan and Pakistan; development of large-scale irrigation works in northern Afghanistan using the waters of the Amu Darya–Panj system; and development of infrastructure around the three main Indian Ocean ports (Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan, Chahr Bahar in Iran) and linking them via road and railroad for shipment of goods and energy to and from Central Asia, China, and the Russian far east. The proposed IPI (Iran–Pakistan–India) gas pipeline (currently opposed by the United States), while bypassing Afghanistan, could also promote regional interdependence and cooperation in a way that Afghanistan would benefit from as well.

At present, a major obstacle to the realization of regional economic development plans is competition among infrastructural plans that benefit different states. The discontinuation of Soviet-era arrangements for resource-sharing among the Central Asian republics, for example, has resulted in a looming water and energy crisis that

is a source of current political tensions. Consequently, despite much attention, cooperation has been stifled on key sectors such as the development of large-scale irrigation works in northern Afghanistan using the waters of the Amu Darya–Panj system. Afghanistan has not utilized its share of these waters under the 1947 Soviet–Afghan border treaty. Such irrigation works could expand the supply of arable land and pasture in this fertile area. This in turn would ease the conflicts over land, especially between Pashtun settlers and nomads on the one hand and other ethnic groups on the other (Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara primarily).

Across the greater Central/South Asian region, governments have undermined each other's regional economic goals. Consequently, regional organizations – SAARC, ECO, and SCO – have proven relatively weak and incapable of providing political capacity to build trust and harmonize interests in support of economic development and regional cooperation. Overlapping multilateral and bilateral trade agreements further complicate harmonization. Meanwhile, China has emerged as one of the most influential economic actors in the region, altering established alliances and patterns of trade. Afghanistan has advocated regional economic cooperation, but thus far its government has lacked the capacity to enter into and implement most of the complex agreements required.

Security

Security arrangements must underpin any stabilization architecture. The core elements of such arrangements are military alliances or agreement not to enter into such alliances (neutrality or non-alignment) and military supply and training relationships. These security arrangements can be reinforced or undermined by political alliances or rivalries and structures or patterns of economic cooperation and competition.

The intervention in Afghanistan of the U.S.-led coalition, later transformed into NATO's first deployment outside of Europe, has changed the security calculus of all stakeholders. That deployment initially enjoyed support both internationally and in Afghanistan itself as the basis

for stabilization of the country to withstand threats from al-Qaeda, its allies, or other non-state actors. Though the intervention was legitimated as creating shared goods – security from terrorism and “stability” – the way that it sought to do so created winners and losers. Pakistan was forced to abandon, at least temporarily, one of its major security policies, support for the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The power of various groups in Afghanistan changed dramatically and continued to do so as troops and money flowed in. The UN-convened Bonn conference was a coalition of the winners in Afghanistan, to the exclusion of the Taliban, not a peace conference that settled the previous civil war.

While the ad hoc coalition that formed the new government in Afghanistan did not have a common defense or security doctrine, a point of general agreement appeared to be welcoming the U.S.-led military presence as a guarantee and deterrence against intervention by the regional actors that those Afghan groups held responsible for previous conflicts, primarily Pakistan, and, to a lesser extent, Iran and Russia. This is the line of thinking that led to the 2005 U.S.-Afghanistan strategic partnership agreement and the U.S.-led training and equipping of the ANSF. These arrangements may also have reinforced the perception of those in Afghanistan who reject the current arrangements that the U.S.-NATO presence is intended to constitute a permanent foreign occupation involving not only foreign troops but also local security forces dependent on them.

With the invasion of Iraq and the expansion of the NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan, a countervailing perception against initial support for the operation has grown among regional states. This attitude has intensified since the signing of the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership agreement in 2005, which led the heads of state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to express concern that the United States and NATO may be exploiting their support for counterterrorism and stabilization to pursue other strategic objectives. Iran, Russia, and China constitute different points along a continuum from more to less perception of threat from a long-term U.S. presence, a concern they all share. The development of a renewed Strategic Partnership agreement, agreed to in principle

at the Karzai-Obama summit in Washington in May 2010, could provide an opportunity to illustrate that a U.S. presence could reassure rather than threaten neighbors.

The current model for building the ANSF is based on U.S.-led training, U.S.-dominated funding, U.S. embedded trainers, U.S. doctrine, and, increasingly, U.S.-manufactured equipment. Though at various times since 2001 Iran, Pakistan, and India have expressed interest in being involved in training of portions of the security forces, thus far the U.S. and Afghan governments have agreed to keep regional actors out of the Afghan security sector. It may be time to reassess this logic and offer to bring regional players inside the security sector on the condition that they cease supporting non-state actors and other components of a regional agreement and international guarantees.

In the face of a growing insurgency, the strategic question remains, how and by whom will security be delivered in Afghanistan? Despite an increased international military presence, it remains unclear how the military strategy fits within a political strategy for stabilization. This question also comes at a time of building domestic opposition to military deployments amongst most NATO allies and growing regional opposition to the ISAF presence.

The current international strategy is based on the assumption that ANSF will take over lead responsibility for security, with a residual international force that is yet to be defined. On paper, this transition has already started – in mid-2008 the government of Afghanistan took over responsibility for the security of Kabul and the surrounding area from ISAF. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February, President Karzai said he planned to build up the ANSF to some 300,000 by 2012 and that, “conditions permitting ... Afghan forces will have full responsibility for security throughout the country, with international forces continuing to serve in the capacity of providing backup and assistance.”⁹

The obvious question this raises is what will the level of threat be at that time, and will the ANSF have the capacity to take on such a responsibility? Equally, the underlying fiscal challenge is also problematic and will require a long-term

commitment by the United States and some allies. Based on current projections for the size of the ANSF, the cost of maintaining such a posture equals nearly half or more of Afghanistan's current licit GDP, a level of expenditure that is not sustainable, would have unforeseeable distorting effects on politics and the economy, and would only exacerbate regional tensions, particularly with Pakistan.¹⁰

Disputes between India and Pakistan, the United States and Iran, and to a lesser degree Russia and NATO all affect the stability of the region generally but Afghanistan more specifically. During his March 11, 2010, visit to Islamabad, President Karzai stated, "Afghanistan does not want any proxy wars on its territory. It does not want a proxy war between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan. It does not want a proxy war between Iran and the United States in Afghanistan."¹¹

Yet with no regional security architecture, there is no obvious alternative for a replacement to NATO. China sees the presence of the United States and NATO as potentially threatening, but it also rightly notes that regional countries are not ready to play a proactive stabilizing role. The current U.S. military presence at Manas Air Force Base in Kyrgyzstan is also of concern to China's military. Bilateral meetings held between the United States and China starting in February 2009 about U.S. goals in Afghanistan and Central Asia were a first step toward allaying suspicion, but more dialogue of this nature is required; a dialogue between NATO and the SCO would be another possible forum for such discussions, which would include other stakeholders as well, notably Russia, Turkey, and many EU members.

For India, the NATO presence constitutes a necessary counterbalance to Pakistan's attempts to establish a sphere of influence in Afghanistan, and allows India to apply a degree of pressure to Pakistan's eastern flank. That said, India is not looking for an open-ended presence of foreign troops in the region. Rather, like Russia and Iran, it would like to see the war "Afghanized" and NATO's presence gradually reduced. India would be likely to react with alarm to the participation of Pakistan in training Afghan security forces; it has sought a role in training the

Afghan police and might seek at least partly to replace NATO in the case of withdrawal.

India would be most concerned by measures the United States might take in an attempt to provide Pakistan with security guarantees that would induce it to decrease or eliminate reliance on extremist groups as an asymmetrical weapon. Pakistan and China both clearly see the U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear deal as U.S. de facto recognition of India as a nuclear power, while U.S. officials continue to express concern over the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and materials and its record of proliferation. Some in the Pakistan security establishment have interpreted these statements to mean that the U.S. has a long-term goal of "de-nuclearizing" Pakistan. Consolidation of a U.S.-NATO presence in an Afghanistan aligned with India would intensify that threat. India therefore suspects that the United States might accede to Pakistani requests for a bilateral nuclear deal or some other measure legitimating Pakistan's status as a nuclear power. India remains hypersensitive to any attempt by outside powers to maintain a balance between it and its much smaller neighbor, Pakistan.

Conclusion

The meetings revealed at the core of the conflicts a deep mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Especially since the breakup of Pakistan through a combination of civil war and Indian military intervention in 1971, its security establishment, largely dominated by the military, has developed a doctrine of needing "strategic depth" in Afghanistan. Such strategic depth would enable a truncated Pakistan to avoid encirclement by India, which also gained nuclear weapons within three years after Pakistan's breakup. The consequent successive attempts by Pakistan dating from 1973 to use largely Pashtun Afghan Islamists as agents of influence in Afghanistan have reinforced deep mistrust across all elements of the Afghan political spectrum, including many of those on whom Pakistan has counted, though the roots of the conflict go back to the colonial border demarcation. Both neighboring states and other stakeholders, finally including the United States and NATO, became embroiled

in the resulting conflicts, which have become global in scope since 9/11.

Since the London Conference, which occurred less than two weeks after CIC's Istanbul meeting, diplomacy on all the issues discussed above has become quite active, with numerous high-level Afghan-Pakistani, Afghan-Iranian, Indian-Saudi, Indian-Russian, Chinese-Saudi, and other regional contacts. The U.S.-sponsored trilateral discussions with Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as the advance in both U.S.-Afghan and U.S.-Pakistani strategic dialogues have created conditions for this movement.

Afghanistan and Pakistan appear to be exploring the possibility of a common approach to a political settlement. Afghanistan is doing so in part in light of the realization that the United States and NATO have been much less effective than Afghans expected, and both want to reduce their presence. The Afghan government is coming to accept that there is an as yet undefined limit to how much the United States and NATO can balance Afghanistan's neighbors in perpetuity. Pakistan uses the incentive of ending the support for the Taliban that it publicly denies providing, and may be inching toward articulating what it considers less than maximalist demands. Those demands may nonetheless exceed the bounds of what Afghanistan and other neighbors can accept. Only U.S. involvement and well-coordinated regional diplomacy (along with continuing military and other actions) may finally convince Pakistan to reduce its aims in Afghanistan to acceptable levels, while encouraging Afghanistan to accommodate some of its concerns, for instance over activities of Baluch separatists. That will also require both U.S. and multilateral engagement with and pressure on Pakistan to meet some of its perceived security needs and strengthen those forces in Pakistan that can envision a concept of national security less single-mindedly focused on the Indian threat – though the latter will at best be a long-term result of this process, rather than an immediate enabler. U.S. cooperation with Saudi Arabia and China may also help limit Pakistani ambitions. The United States might also help informally to reassure Pakistan about the benevolence of India's activities in Afghanistan.

Without such a framework, a process of Afghanistan rapprochement with Pakistan, combined with reconciliation with the Taliban, would set off alarms in parts of the region – hence the accelerated pace of engagement by Iran, Russia, and India. As the overall sponsor of Afghan-Pakistani engagement, the United States, perhaps in partnership with the UN, must also facilitate a discussion of acceptable outcomes among Russia, China, and India. A participant from one of these countries suggested that the United States should manage or host such discussions. An alternative approach is a neutral third party convening these discussions in informal settings. Given the state of U.S.-Iran relations, others – Russia, China, India, and Afghanistan – would have to engage Tehran. The United States and others engaged in the six-party talks over Iran's nuclear program might face difficult choices about how to reconcile their need to engage Iran about Afghanistan while continuing to pressure or confront it over the nuclear issue.

While these suggestions are all focused on processes, it is through such processes that enough confidence can be built to start substantive discussions of the issues identified through these meetings. Since President Obama's West Point speech, which set a date for the start of U.S. withdrawal, and the London Conference, which endorsed in general terms a political approach to the insurgency, a dynamic of settlement has started to emerge. That dynamic, however, has aroused fears as well as hopes. Given the lack of capacity of the Afghan government and security architecture in the region to enforce a settlement, the prospect of negotiations has aroused anxieties that such talk will only disguise concessions and collapse. The results of these discussions and the reality of accelerating engagement, however, point to the possibility of a different outcome. Genuine opportunities for regional cooperation exist, but only consistent engagement of the United States and other major powers as guarantors will make it possible to realize these possibilities.

Endnotes

¹Communiqué of the London Conference on Afghanistan, Lancaster House, 28 January 2010.

²Joint Statement from the President and President Karzai of Afghanistan, May 12, 2010, Office of the Press Secretary.

³"Neutralization" – the product of an international agreement – is different from "neutrality," a decision by a state or government not to join alliances. See "Ultimate Exit Strategy" by Karl F. Inderfurth and James Dobbins, International Herald Tribune, March 26, 2009.

⁴Communiqué of the London Conference on Afghanistan, Lancaster House, 28 January, 2010.

⁵Plan considered to buy off Taliban, Al Jazeera, January 27, 2010.

⁶President Hamid Karzai's opening remarks at the London Conference on Afghanistan, January 28, 2010.

⁷Joint Statement from the President and President Karzai of Afghanistan, May 12, 2010, Office of the Press Secretary.

⁸U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Discussions, USIP, May 11 2010.

⁹President Karzai's speech at the 46th Munich Security Conference, February 7, 2010.

¹⁰The recurrent cost of maintaining the ANSF at its eventual full size depends on the target. The full complement of Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) proposed in the request to the president presented by the Department of Defense after last June's report of General Stanley McChrystal was estimated at \$10 billion per annum. The nominal licit GDP of Afghanistan in 2009-2010 was estimated by the IMF at \$13 billion (<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2010/cr1022.pdf>, p. 20). No new target has been set, but the minimal figure seems to be around \$6 billion. None of these proposals has been examined by the Afghan National Assembly.

¹¹<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE62A1FX20100311>.

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