

Afghanistan's neighbours: Great Game, Regional Approach or Limited Liability Opportunism?

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1. Afghanistan's neighbours: Executive Summary

Afghanistan's future is completely dependent upon positive and constructive approaches from its neighbours and near neighbours. Humanitarian aid and political, economic and reconstruction support has been received by Afghanistan from all its neighbours. However, the intentions and actions of Afghanistan's neighbours are not always as constructive as they might be. Much activity can still be defined as 'malign interference'. Iran, and most crucially, Pakistan, look to have covert agendas that are intended to serve their own interests—at the expense of Afghanistan if necessary.

It is not merely the issue of covert agendas that are restricting the value of neighbourly interventions. Lack of capacity and resources will hinder the potential of the Central Asian States to make significant contributions for a decade or two. With the exception of China, all of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours appear to be at some risk of their own internal strife over the next two to five years.

The uncertainty generated by the deteriorating security situation, which is now spreading into non-Pushtun areas of Afghanistan, is causing growing concern. Both inside and outside Afghanistan, increasing criticism and a sense of 'wait and see' is making it even harder for the Afghan government and international community to create the forward momentum necessary.

These remain critical years for Afghanistan. While it is hard to find a neighbour that does not desire—both publicly and privately—peace and stability inside Afghanistan, each neighbour has a distinctly different vision of what this peace and stability should look like. For certainly the next five to ten years, Afghanistan's growth, development and security will be dependent, for good or ill, on the activities of its neighbours. These efforts have been, are, and will continue be a mixed and uncoordinated bag of positive assistance, self interest and damaging interference

The Central Asian States

Seeming regularly to teeter on the brink of becoming 'new Afghanistans', this corrupt, ineffective and repressive collection of post-Soviet regimes continue to make the region unattractive to international investors. But their contribution to ISAF supply routes makes them important to the international effort in Afghanistan, and there is longer-term potential in developing trading routes that feed into and through northern Afghanistan. However, the CAS' inability to do much of anything proactive makes them of questionable value for Afghanistan. The regular risk of internal unrest in the CAS makes them more likely to be a problem than a solution in the near term.

Pakistan

The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is complex and controversial. Historic differences rub shoulders with recent and more pressing disputes. Pakistan's problematic relationship with India, its willingness to sponsor terrorism and its tendency to flip between military dictatorship and weak and corrupt civilian rule,

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continue to make Pakistan unattractive as a neighbour. The Pakistani intelligence services still appear to be supporting the US and the Afghan Taliban in a high risk 'double game'. Pakistan would prefer a Pushtun-dominated and passive client state to its west, but Afghanistan clearly has no immediate desire to fill this role. This has been a source of major friction between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan's interventions in the future will remain self-interested at best and malign at worst.

India

India's relationship with Afghanistan is usually seen in the context of its more fraught relationship with Pakistan. Its relationship with Afghanistan has been constructive, with Indian economic and trade initiatives with Afghanistan substantial. But India remains keen to thwart Pakistani ambitions in the country. Road, pipeline and transmission line initiatives form part of India's strategy of reach around and across Pakistan and into resource-rich Central Asia. An improving relationship between India and Pakistan remains crucial to the stable development of Afghanistan. It also remains unlikely in the near term.

Iran

Instability emanating from Afghanistan has been a major cause of concern and cost for Iran for several decades and Iran has much to gain from a stable Afghanistan offering trade opportunities. Much of its engagement has been mature, pragmatic, and constructive. But Iran calibrates its activities in Afghanistan based on wider strategic contexts—its relationship with the international community and the United States in particular. Sometimes Afghanistan has been caught in disagreements between Iran and the West. Although Iran remains fundamentally opposed to the Taliban, reporting suggests that Iranian weapons have fallen into the hands of the Taliban. This is likely to be a warning to the West that its presence remains unwelcome. In any future deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, Iran may revert to the practise of providing weapons and money to favoured proxies inside Afghanistan that would include Shia communities.

China

China views uncontrolled instability in the region with alarm, fearing spill-over across its borders. It remains keenly interested in peace and stability returning to Afghanistan. China's biggest interest in Afghanistan lies in trade and economic development, as a part of a wider strategic drive towards the energy and resources of central and southern Asia. Despite an essentially cautious approach, China has invested significantly—a \$4 billion stake in Afghan copper mines. The relationship between China and Afghanistan is cordial and continues to improve with the increasing investment China is making.

Russia

Russia has avoided military entanglement this time, after the painful lessons of its own intervention in the 1980s. It remains happy for the US to combat the Taliban—and even happier to gain leverage over NATO through the assistance it provides with ISAF northern supply routes. While Russia remains concerned at the prospect of a semi-permanent US presence (for example military bases) in the region, its most pressing concerns are the flow of narcotics into Russia and the desire to see the spread of Islamic fundamentalism rolled back from its borders. Otherwise, Russia appears to prefer to bide its time, looking for future trade and economic opportunities in Afghanistan for as little effort as possible.

The International Community

Years of neglect or indifference followed by bursts of confused attention and fragmented activity have been the key themes of the international community's involvement in Afghanistan for decades. The international community's mixed messages, limited understanding of the country and the region and its growing weariness of Afghanistan are hampering Afghanistan's development. In part, this is the reason for the wide range and scale of Afghanistan's problems today. International forces are already pulling out from Afghanistan and disengagement will quicken from mid-2011. Few neighbours now appear to believe that the international community will stay to complete the task of rebuilding Afghanistan and will be starting to look at new 'coping strategies' as they contemplate the prospect of a fragile 'unfinished' state, that risks drifting towards collapse. Ultimately, a civil war may be the end result of a premature international disengagement.

Northern Afghanistan

Northern Afghanistan is probably the most benign of the operating areas for ISAF. Furthest away from the natural Taliban operating environments of the south and east, Northern Afghanistan was the last area to be reached by the Taliban during the civil war of the 1990s and was never fully controlled by them. But, although Northern Afghanistan is currently still stable, Afghanistan's problems, in particular the confident and capable insurgency, look increasingly evident in the north.

With a worsening of the security situation and a lessening of international involvement, Northern Afghanistan's neighbouring countries demonstrate no real evidence of the skills, desire and resources necessary to intervene *proactively* in a benign and constructive manner. The civil war in the 1990s may offer indications of the way developments might unfold in Northern Afghanistan in the event of worsening instability in Afghanistan in the next two to five years. Neighbouring countries might again 'cherry pick' the leaderships of the militia, religious and political groups that are closest to their own agendas to be recipients of covert support. This might evolve into a North against South form of civil war

Future Prospects

If even one quarter of the plans for developing Afghan trade, transport, government and infrastructure networks were reality, Afghanistan's future would be assured. But neighbouring countries will remain unlikely to commit in a constructive and co-ordinated fashion because they do not yet know which way Afghanistan is going and their individual agendas are often in violent contradiction. In pursuit of these agendas, some neighbours may be more interested in destructive 'spoiler' activity, at least in the short term.

With the increasingly obvious desire of the international community to get out of Afghanistan, Afghanistan's neighbours and near neighbours will start repositioning themselves for the consequences. The best that can be expected from neighbours and near-neighbours are self-interested effort at minimal risk. They will protect investments as necessary, expanding them where possible, and hope for a stabilisation of the situation that will require minimal effort from their part. Afghanistan will struggle to break out of its slow spiral downward as a result.

2. Introduction

*...having good relations is extremely important to Afghanistan. Landlocked and arid, it can develop economically only through regional cooperation to manage its water resources, connect to the international market and obtain energy.*¹

Barnett Rubin, March 2006.

In the autumn of 2008, SIPRI produced a paper for the Swedish Ministry of Defence entitled: ‘Where will Afghanistan be in 1, 5 and 10 years time?’² The conclusions were not encouraging, suggesting very strongly that Afghanistan may be heading for perhaps even greater turmoil in the next half a decade or so. Regrettably, the situation, a year and a half on from time of writing, does not appear to have significantly improved and in many ways looks to have worsened. In June of 2010, the monthly numbers of ISAF military casualties reached the hundred mark for the first time.³ The Obama administration has effectively announced a ‘deadline’ of July 2011 for the commencement of the withdrawal of US troops. The US is thereby clearly signalling what many observers, in and out of the region, have suspected for some time—that the international community is rapidly wearying of the struggle in Afghanistan and is looking to get out as soon as is plausibly possible.

The Taliban perceive that the increasing volume of Western calls for political solutions and negotiation is an indication of weakness and reluctance to stay the distance. Two members of the NATO alliance have already *unilaterally* announced their intention to leave and the mixed and increasingly unconvincing messages from the international community (NATO’s ‘failure is not an option’ is a good example) have not been lost on the Taliban. This is slowly reducing the prospects of a credible reconciliation and reintegration process—if there were any. The Afghan government’s peace and reintegration plans look naïve and unappealing—high on aspiration and ‘business-speak’ but low on practicalities. What is particularly lacking is evidence that the insurgents actually have any interest in either reintegration or reconciliation. To quote from Ahmed Rashid in May of 2010:

Most Afghans believe the US endgame is well underway...For Afghans and powerful neighbours such as Pakistan, India and Iran, it is abundantly clear that the first American soldier to leave will be followed with a rush to the exit by European NATO countries...⁴

The recent—and not so recent—history of Afghanistan is a fascinating and complex study of the impact that neighbouring countries can have on a country. There is still perhaps no better description of the developments of the relationships in and around Afghanistan than the one coined in the 19th century, probably by a British

¹ Rubin, B., ‘Afghanistan’s Uncertain transition From Turmoil to Normalcy’, *Council on Foreign Relations, Special Report No. 12*, Mar 2006, http://www.cfr.org/publication/10273/afghanistans_uncertain_transition_from_turmoil_to_normalcy.htm

² Foxley, T., ‘Where will Afghanistan be in 1, 5 and 10 years time?’, *SIPRI Project Paper*, Oct. 2008.

³ Source: icasualties.org, <http://www.icasualties.org/OEF/index.aspx>

⁴ Rashid, A., ‘America’s Fatal Flaws in Afghanistan: Why Talks With the Taliban Are the Best Option’, *Der Spiegel*, 26 May 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,696662,00.html>

Army officer, ‘the Great Game’.⁵ It is difficult, but not impossible, for countries to change their neighbours. The two super powers of the days of the original Great Game, Russia and Great Britain, now no longer have contiguous borders with Afghanistan. Nevertheless, since the 19th century, both nations still have a keen interest in the region and in Afghanistan in particular. And both, with debatably varying degrees of success, have committed large numbers of troops into the country.

The current contiguous neighbours of Afghanistan: Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan are tied into the fate of Afghanistan for a whole range of historic, cultural, ethnic, economic, geographic, religious and tribal reasons. Each neighbour brings a different set of concerns and issues into their relationship with Afghanistan. Pakistan’s historic and controversial support for the Taliban and fear of India routinely see it accused by a variety of regional and international actors—and with much justification—of playing a ‘double game’ in Afghanistan. China, with its very short (only some 76 kilometres) border has growing economic investment interests but has otherwise kept a low profile. Iran is torn between its dislike of the Taliban and its dislike of the large US military presence that is currently combating the Taliban. The Central Asian states, with their ramshackle infrastructure, oppressive political climate and continual threats to internal stability seem barely able to deal with their own substantial problems, let alone contribute something tangible and constructive for their neighbour to the south.

It is hard to find a neighbour that does not desire—both publicly and privately—for peace and stability to come to Afghanistan. But each neighbour has a distinctly different vision of what this peace and stability should look like. Some see the destruction of the Taliban as the key, for others the survival of the Taliban is important. Yet others still desire the removal of the narcotics threat or the opening up of trade routes and exploitation of mineral assets.

But even within the foreign policy calculations of each individual neighbour and near neighbour there are contradictions at play. While many are, if not happy, then at least reasonably content, for the US-led military coalition to continue to tackle the Taliban, they are increasingly concerned—Russia and Iran in particular—about the possibility of a permanent presence of this US footprint in Central and Southern Asia. Russia and Iran have also been highly critical of the international effort to tackle narcotics in Afghanistan and yet have been hard pressed to come up with viable solutions of their own. Pakistan would welcome a stable ‘client state’ in Afghanistan that it could dominate, but it would be uneasy at a peaceful and stable Afghanistan that enabled India to bring its significant economic and trading potential freely into play.

There may be even greater contradictions. Many neighbours and powerful actors inside Afghanistan are financially benefiting from the massive international engagement (supply routes and US bases in the Central Asian States, military and development aid for Pakistan, security contracts to warlords). An outbreak of the kind of peace and stability desired by most of the Afghan population may not be the most desirable outcome for others in the region.

But these remain critical years for Afghanistan. Today, in 2010, it is regrettably still easier to see the naked self-interest of neighbouring countries dominating developments in Afghanistan than it is to see progress in some of the more genuine efforts from neighbours and the wider international community. But for the next five to ten years, and likely even longer, Afghanistan’s growth, development and security

⁵ Hopkirk, P., *The Great Game*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991), p. 1.

will be dependent, for good or ill, on the activities of its neighbours. These efforts have been, are, and will be for another decade at least, a mixed bag of positive assistance and covert interference

Methodology

The intention of this paper is to take an overview of the key strategic themes and trends in the relationships between Afghanistan, its neighbours, near neighbours and the international community. The paper will attempt, from analysis of the activities and intentions of Afghanistan's neighbours, to draw out any key military, political or economic issues that may be of relevance for the long-term planning purposes of the Nordic nations currently deployed in northern Afghanistan.

It rapidly becomes clear that there are two main potential approaches for the paper: analysis country by country or theme by theme (insurgency, narcotics, economy). An attempt to do both would involve many important issues receiving only a few paragraphs of attention and even less strategic analysis. A country by country study has been undertaken here and key regional themes have been brought out in the relevant country chapters. Clearly these themes will often appear in more than one chapter. Each Afghanistan/neighbour relationship is deserving of a paper in its own right and a 50 to 60 page report does not actually allow much scope for detail. Attempting to cover all the various permutations of neighbour-to-neighbour relations has been avoided in all but the most significant cases, as it would risk losing strategic overview intention of the paper.

It is also not the intention of this paper to record significant amounts of history, either of Afghanistan or of the neighbours. It is hoped that any desired additional detail will be found in the footnotes that accompany this paper. Attention is drawn to Chapter 13, which highlights the most useful books, reports, documents and analysis that have been considered in the writing of this paper. However, it has sometimes been necessary to cover the same historic ground more than once, in order to get a sense of the different neighbour perspectives—Indian and Pakistani experiences of the Soviet invasion and Pakistani and international experiences of the 2001 defeat of the Taliban, are two examples.

In an era of globalisation, the definition of 'neighbour' has had to be stretched to encompass non-geographic neighbours, organisations and actors with a stake in this country and the region. A good example is perhaps India, who has no common border with Afghanistan, because it is not possible to assess Pakistan's role and stake in Afghanistan without considering its still problematic relationship with India. Furthermore, India has had, and will continue to have, extensive political, economic and investment involvement in Afghanistan in its own right. Another example of a 'nearly neighbour' with a major stake and influence in Afghanistan is Russia.

Stretching the point further, it has also been necessary to contemplate the 'international community' as a whole, given its extensive role in Afghanistan. In 2010 there were 46 nations amassing approximately 120,000 soldiers in Afghanistan trying to counter the Taliban militarily and at the same time providing long-term political, reconstruction and development assistance.⁶ Sometimes the definition of international community here will be loose. It will be used to cover a military force—ISAF—as well as other multinational political and military groupings such as NATO, the UN,

⁶ ISAF Placemat as at June 2010, <http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php>

the EU and, occasionally, the plans, policies and intentions of more prominent individual nations, such as the US. But it is necessary to draw the line somewhere. Not all ‘non-neighbour actors’ involved in Afghanistan will feature significantly in this study: individual European nations, the role of the Middle East—Saudi Arabia in particular—or the impact of NGOs, for example. Arguably, these all deserve analysis, but it would be an unrealistic stretching of the scope of this paper.

And finally, it has been impossible for this paper to avoid the increasingly pessimistic outlook for Afghanistan. The description of ‘civil war’ is coming into increasing use in analysis that considers Afghanistan’s future. As a result it has been felt necessary for the paper to spend more time reflecting upon negative security outcomes—particularly in the Northern Afghanistan chapter—than might have been the case, had the paper been commissioned two or three years earlier.

3. Background

History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

Attributed to Mark Twain.

The last thirty years of Afghanistan's history have been devastating to its population. Afghan infrastructure, society, economy (particularly agriculture) and its political and governance systems have been fragmented in a most brutal and chaotic fashion. Such extreme conflict and instability in Afghanistan have not provoked neutral stances from its neighbours—often, they have been a significant cause of the instability in the first place or a reason that the problems have been so prolonged. Since the late 1970s, the country has undergone internal instability, external military intervention, two variants of civil war and back to external military intervention again in the form of ISAF. Since 2002, Afghanistan has played unwilling host to a protracted and growing Taliban insurgency. In the next five years or so, there is a real possibility that the shadows of civil war may once again emerge.⁷ Many analysts recommend urgently talking to the Taliban. One former US Ambassador to the region has suggested that a north-south partition of Afghanistan is a viable—and indeed desirable—solution.⁸

During the period of the Soviet occupation, Afghanistan's neighbours offered a mixture of reactions, based on their own individual experiences, resources and pragmatic calculation. India supported the Soviet-installed regime. Pakistan and Iran suffered greatly from the millions of refugees that flooded into their countries. Iran was looking inward with the upheaval of its own Islamic revolution, but the Central Asian States were then a part of the Soviet Union, contributing soldiers to fight in Afghanistan and, by virtue of their location, providing a vital logistical land link that supported that occupation. That land link is now once again, perhaps somewhat more successfully, providing support for the second international military presence in Afghanistan. Pakistan, although understandably keen to avoid a conventional military confrontation with its new Soviet neighbour on its border, provided safe havens, not only for several million refugees, but also for the *Mujahideen*. These 'Soldiers of God' Afghan resistance fighters—'insurgents' in common modern military parlance—were very successful in opposing, and ultimately ejecting, the Soviet Army. They were funded, trained and equipped by a combined Pakistani and American covert operations initiative. Only China, it seems, managed to keep the decade-long crisis more or less at arms length, although many hundreds, if not thousands of Chinese-made weapons made their way indirectly into the country. Even to this day, indirect approaches to intervention in Afghanistan—particularly the use of proxies—remains an attractive and low risk option for Afghanistan's neighbours.

But the success of this insurgency, however, was to pave the way for further strife for Afghanistan. The Soviet retreat and the collapse of the puppet regime under Najibullah saw widespread in-fighting amongst the Mujahideen factions who were

⁷ Meo, N., 'Afghanistan despatch: "If Nato pulls out too early there will be civil war again"', *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 Aug. 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/onthe frontline/7931823/Afghanistan-despatch-If-Nato-pulls-out-too-early-there-will-be-civil-war-again.html>

⁸ Blackwill, R., 'A de facto partition for Afghanistan', *Politico*, 7 July 2010, <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=AACEE164-18FE-70B2-A8E30566E50DFB3A>

unable to unite long enough to agree on a coalition government, once they had lost a common enemy against which to fight. This bloody civil war was fuelled by the injection of money and weapons from Afghanistan's neighbours, while the US lost interest.

The Taliban emerged from this chaos as a counter-response to what they saw as the corruption of the former Mujahideen. They wanted to restore order, Islamic purity and Sharia justice to Afghanistan. They caught the attention of the Pakistani intelligence services, who saw in them the possibility, by supporting them militarily and financially, to use them as a pro-Pakistani regime. Bringing the Taliban to power would serve their key strategic goal of protecting their western flank against Indian influence. The harshness of the Taliban regime and the hospitality offered by the Taliban to Arab former fighters, such as Osama Bin Laden and his al Qaeda movement, were not judged to be significant problems.

The al Qaeda organised terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US-led invasion of Afghanistan are well documented. This form of international intervention—and in particular, the speed of the Taliban's collapse—brought renewed hope and optimism amongst the Afghan populace. Although most neighbouring states were understandably concerned by the massive US military presence, they were also reassured by the removal of the Taliban and the commitments of the international community that Afghanistan would not be abandoned again.

This 'window of opportunity' looks now to have been all but squandered. Al Qaeda fled only as far as the Tribal areas in Pakistan and the Taliban, in the absence of governance in southern Afghanistan, started to drift back into the country. The international community struggled to coherently apply their financial and military resources, battling a growing insurgency and their own lack of understanding of Afghanistan. The Afghan population, alarmed at the regularity with which international forces violated cultural codes and inflicted civilian casualties, grew frustrated—tired of hearing promises of reconstruction and development with little perceived result.

The view from Afghanistan

In 2010, Afghanistan is still walking a precarious tightrope, still balancing the demands and pressures upon it from neighbours and the international community on the one hand, with its own perceived short, medium and long term needs on the other. There are ups and downs in all these relationships. Afghanistan has to please, placate, reject or attract a whole range of different influences that are at play within and without its borders. But the support of the international community—specifically the role of the 120,000 strong International Security Assistance Force, ISAF—is understood by President Karzai and his government as likely to remain crucial to supporting the government and deterring aggressors for at the very least another five years.

Afghanistan's strategic dilemma, when looking outwards at its neighbours and contemplating its options, was summed up neatly by Barnett Rubin in 2006:

Afghanistan's regional dilemmas go beyond Pakistan. Afghanistan's weakness has always posed a strategic dilemma for its rulers. Because the country has never produced enough wealth to pay the cost of governing or defending itself, Afghanistan has been stable only when

its neighbours or imperial powers agreed to strengthen it as a buffer or non-aligned state to serve external security interests. The resulting lack of domestic legitimacy, however, has created opportunities for other foreign powers to intervene.⁹

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties in Afghanistan's recent history is that it has not been able to fully recognise, let alone realise, its own economic potential.¹⁰ But perhaps one of Afghanistan's greatest causes for optimism in the longer term is that the country does actually have major and valuable natural assets. This is both in terms of tangible mineral deposits, agricultural potential and its invaluable 'land bridge' location between the markets of Europe, the Middle East and Asia. In the July 2010 international conference in Kabul, President Karzai very clearly stated his vision that Afghanistan should become the regional 'roundabout' for trade, goods and services:

Afghanistan is re-emerging as the "Asian Roundabout," a central point of interconnection of goods, ideas, services and people in the fast expanding Asian economy. Our vision is to be the peaceful meeting place of civilisations. Our location in the centre of the new Silk Road makes us a convergence point of regional and global economic interests.¹¹

Opening up Afghanistan in this fashion is going to be a key feature in Afghanistan's rehabilitation. Given the abundance of plans regarding pipelines, electricity transmission routes, road and rail grids and telecommunications, it is tempting to view the future with great optimism.¹²

But two major problems are likely to ensure slow and fragile progress. Instability, whether caused by the Jihadi-fuelled insurgency or non-aligned militia groups, will continue to make investment a very unattractive proposition. Unless the security situation significantly improves—and, above all, is *perceived* to be so—it will likely prove very difficult for regional and international investors to secure returns on their investments. Furthermore, the Afghan government's own lack of capacity is a stark reminder of how far the country needs to develop in order to realise Karzai's Kabul Conference vision. Much of this is still a problem of limitation: the lack of trained and competent personnel, a lack of regulation and control of administration. More specifically, the culture of corruption—and, from an international perspective, the Afghan government's apparent inability, or even unwillingness, to tackle this in a robust fashion—is causing international donors to rethink their contributions. In June

⁹ Rubin, B., 'Afghanistan's Uncertain transition From Turmoil to Normalcy', *Council on Foreign Relations paper, Council Special Report No. 12*, Mar 2006, http://www.cfr.org/publication/10273/afghanistans_uncertain_transition_from_turmoil_to_normalcy.html

¹⁰ Risen, J., 'U.S. Identifies Vast Mineral Riches in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 13 June 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/world/asia/14minerals.html>

¹¹ 'Statement by President Karzai at International Kabul Conference', 20 July 2010, <http://president.gov.af/Contents/72/Documents/2030/Statement%20by%20President%20Karzai%20at%20International%20Kabul%20Conference%20-%20English.pdf>

¹² A comprehensive, but perhaps very over-optimistic, example apparently receiving much attention within the US government, is: Starr, F. and Kuchins, A., 'The Key to Success in Afghanistan: A Modern Silk Road Strategy', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute/Silk Road studies Program Silk Road Paper*, May 2010, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/1005Afghan.pdf>

2010, even the US put a brake on the impending allocation of \$3.6 billion in response to further allegations of corruption within the Afghan government.¹³

¹³ Miller, G., 'U.S. lawmaker to withhold \$3.9 billion in Afghan aid over corruption problems', *The Washington Post*, 29 June 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/28/AR2010062803296.html>

4. The Central Asian States

*For good or ill, Central Asia is back once again in the thick of the news, and likely to remain there for a very long time to come.*¹⁴

Peter Hopkirk, 1997.

Overview

The Central Asian States (CAS) seem regularly to teeter on the brink of becoming ‘new Afghanistans’. In the 1990s, the countries comprising the CAS (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) inherited, and then continued to run with, the sort of corrupt, ineffective and repressive governments that gave Communism a bad name. Although they have not yet squandered their resource-rich potential, they continue to unintentionally make the area as unattractive as possible to international investors.

The CAS—and it is possible to crudely lump them together when considering the region in overview—have been largely passive and broadly incapable of contributing to either stability or instability in Afghanistan. Their weak and limited security capability is allowing millions of dollars worth of narcotics to flow through their states and flood into Russia and Europe. Furthermore their crude, cruel and authoritarian regimes appear to be routinely close to triggering one form of unrest or another, perhaps the most worrying of which is still Islamic fundamentalism.

Perhaps the only significant exception to this statement is their role in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a road and air bridge supported by a US transit base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan. This allows a significant portion of ISAF’s non-military supplies to enter Afghanistan without having to brave the more dangerous Pakistani routes. However, the CAS’ participation in the NDN has not been particularly proactive or lacking in self-interest. They have been driven primarily by the prospects of financial assistance, a desire for a blind eye to be turned to some of their more repressive practises and to balance the mix of welcome and unwelcome pressures and attention from Russia and the United States.

The potential for internal instability within the CAS remains great. In April 2010, the Kyrgyz government was violently overthrown, amid charges of brutality and corruption. In June, ethnic violence broke out, leading to reports of deaths and injuries into the thousands and refugees fleeing the violence into the tens of thousands.¹⁵ Many analysts conclude that what happened in Kyrgyzstan could just as easily happen in other Central Asian States:

The collapse of the Bakiyev regime is a case study of the risks facing authoritarianism in Central Asia. What happened in Kyrgyzstan in terms of corruption and repression is already taking place in several other countries. What happened in Bishkek in April 2010 could happen in most of its neighbours. It could indeed be much worse. Central Asia’s leaders will probably

¹⁴ Hopkirk, P., *The Great Game*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991).

¹⁵ BBC, ‘Tens of thousands flee ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan’, *BBC News*, 10 June 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10304165>

ignore this warning, but at their peril.¹⁶

Afghanistan has a significant representation of Central Asian ethnic groups within its borders. The CIA World Fact Book indicates that Tajiks make up 27% of the population, the Uzbeks 9% and the Turkmens 3%, with Turkic languages, predominantly Uzbek and Turkmen being spoken amongst 11% of the population. In the last few decades, violence purely based on ethnicity has been—perhaps surprisingly—relatively uncommon. It is worth noting that there is no evidence of separatism amongst these ethnic groups—the Central Asian States have no territorial demands on Afghanistan and all the Afghan ethnicities in Northern Afghanistan appear to be happy being Afghan. Things are slightly more complex on the Afghan-Pakistan border.

However, during the 1990s, those Afghan ethnic groups located predominantly in northern Afghanistan, in particular along the borders with their respective neighbouring Central Asian States, tended to unify in coalitions that opposed the Pushtun-dominated efforts of the Taliban to spread into northern Afghanistan. The most prominent alliance in this context was the Northern Alliance—a fluid anti-Taliban coalition driven by military, political and religious factions (rather than ethnic ones). The Northern Alliance was supported by neighbours and near-neighbours opposed to the growing strength of the radical Islam of the Taliban. In 2001, Ahmed Rashid noted this polarising effect that the Taliban had in the late 1990s and highlighted the greater risks of instability (applicable to the future as much as to the past) as the Taliban penetrated into the north:

...the Taliban have inadvertently set a new agenda for Islamic radicalism in the whole region, sending shock waves through Afghanistan's neighbours. Not surprisingly, Iran, Turkey, India, Russia and four of the five Central Asian Republics—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—have backed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance with arms and money to try and halt the Taliban's advance... The Taliban victories in northern Afghanistan in the summer of 1998 and their control of over 90% of the country, set in motion an even fiercer regional conflict...¹⁷

In the future, if the Central Asian States feared the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, in particular into Northern Afghanistan, and there was no international military buffer to absorb and counter the impact, support might once again be directed to new forms of Northern Alliance-style groupings in northern Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan

Overview

Gaining independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan is often seen as the most repressive of all the Central Asian regimes. Turkmenistan is

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, 'Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses', *ICG Asia Briefing No. 102*, 27 Apr. 2010, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan.aspx>

¹⁷ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), p. 5.

impoverished and isolated, although it claims to have the fifth largest natural gas reserve in the world. The death of the eccentric ‘President for life’ Saparmurat Niyazov in December 2006 brought only limited international hope of change its dictatorial system. Successor President, Kurbanguly Berdymuhamedov, (formerly Niyazov’s personal dentist) shows some sign of an attempt to end Turkmenistan’s isolation but little sign of any desire for much overdue political and economic reform.¹⁸ Until such times, the crucial international engagement and investment that might develop Turkmenistan’s resource potential and improve the living conditions of its population is unlikely to be forthcoming.¹⁹

Relations with Afghanistan

Turkmenistan was one of the launch pads for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. During the 1990s it declared itself neutral, but established ‘working relations’ with the Taliban and engaged in—ultimately fruitless—negotiations with an American company, Unocal, to construct a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan to Pakistan.²¹ The Turkmen ethnic group numbers approximately one million inside Afghanistan, predominantly grouped along Afghanistan’s border with Turkmenistan. This represents around 3% of Afghanistan’s population.²² Turkmenistan supported the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and has good relations with President Karzai and the Afghan government. It provided some limited humanitarian aid to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the defeat of the Taliban regime in 2001.

Key issues

Islamic fundamentalism does not appear to have penetrated into Turkmenistan. The issue of the TAPI gas pipeline (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) is still extant, but Turkmen and Afghan unpredictability make progress on this initiative, which would clearly be of benefit to both, quite problematic.

The drug trade is also a problem for Turkmenistan, but, with accurate information difficult to access, it is possible to make only a few generalisations. It is highly likely that trafficking continues across what is almost certainly a poorly controlled Turkmenistan/Afghanistan border and the fault will lie with the weakness of border controls and corruption within both governments. Reporting suggests that drug

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, ‘Turkmenistan after Niyazov’, *ICG Asia Briefing No. 60*, 12 Feb. 2007, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/turkmenistan/B060-turkmenistan-after-niyazov.aspx>

¹⁹ BBC, ‘Turkmenistan country profile’, *BBC News*, 4 Mar. 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1298497.stm

²⁰ CIA, *The World Factbook*, 24 June 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

²¹ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), p. 61 and p. 173.

²² CIA, *The World Factbook*, 24 June 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

addiction is on the rise within Turkmenistan and that elements of the government may even be involved in facilitating the trafficking.²³

Prospects and impact

An opening up of Turkmenistan's society, particularly much needed political freedoms and the development of trade and economic measures—including co-operation with its neighbours—could make a significant contribution to stability and the free-flowing of trade, goods and commodities. But narcotics trafficking is likely to continue through Turkmenistan's border with Afghanistan, and, with prospects for Turkmenistan itself looking pessimistic and uncertain, it remains unlikely that Turkmenistan will be in a position to make a useful contribution to Afghanistan's own stability in the next half a decade. Indeed, although evidence is currently limited or difficult to access, Turkmenistan's deep-rooted problems point, like Kyrgyzstan, to the very real potential for unrest within its own borders. Such an internal crisis would, at best, hamper prospects for Afghan development and, at worst, increase Afghan instability.

Uzbekistan

Overview

Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1991, following the fall of the Soviet Union. With its oppressive political climate, extensive suppression of the media and violent repression of any form of popular protest (including a brutal crack down against protests in its eastern city of Andijan in 2005 that reportedly led to hundreds of deaths), Uzbekistan's prospects and direction are unclear. It was perhaps unsurprising that, in mid-2007, the International Crisis Group felt it necessary to make the following sobering assessment:

Of the five Central Asian states, Uzbekistan is probably at greatest risk for eventual instability.²⁴

Relations with Afghanistan

²³ '...because of the closed nature of Turkmenistan's society, it is not known how widespread drug abuse and drug trafficking is there. Up until his death in 2006, Niyazov and his government refused to recognize that there was even a drug problem. It is believed that the Niyazov regime, or at least elements within it, facilitated drug trafficking from Afghanistan, and there is evidence to suggest that heroin abuse in the country is rapidly rising.' Institute for the Study of War, 'Turkmenistan and Afghanistan' <http://www.understandingwar.org/themenode/turkmenistan-and-afghanistan>

²⁴ International Crisis Group, 'Uzbekistan: Stagnation and Uncertainty', *ICG Asia Briefing No. 67*, 22 Aug. 2007, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2007/asia/uzbekistan-stagnation-and-uncertainty.aspx>

Another springboard for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, Uzbekistan followed the Russian lead in supporting the Northern Alliance during its protracted conflict against the Taliban. Ethnic Uzbeks make up approximately 9% of the population of Afghanistan. They are grouped predominantly in northern Afghanistan across the Uzbek/Afghan border, which stretches for only 137 kilometres.²⁵ Uzbekistan has been concerned at the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and it periodically gave assistance to its favoured Afghan ‘client’, the ethnic Uzbek warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, who fought the Taliban advances into northern Afghanistan. Uzbekistan also offered Dostum safe haven twice when military reverses forced him to flee Afghanistan. The Uzbek regime is believed still to retain ties with Dostum.

Uzbekistan supported the removal of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the new Afghan interim government of Afghanistan under Hamid Karzai. But the two countries have not had extensive dealings since 2001. Karzai visited Uzbekistan in June 2010 as part of the 10th Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) summit.

Key issues

Support for the international military effort in Afghanistan is perhaps the major component of Uzbekistan’s assistance to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is a participant in the Northern Distribution Network, the system of road, rail and air networks that help to supply ISAF. From 2001 to 2002, Uzbekistan provided military basing facilities for the US to enable it to reinforce and supply its forces in Afghanistan. Following US—and global—criticism of a brutal crackdown on protestors in which hundreds reportedly died in Andijan, the Uzbek government withdrew permission for the US to use its territory. In 2009, with Uzbek/US relations apparently improved, Uzbekistan once again reopened its borders to the US military logistics network.

Uzbekistan remains a major narco-trafficking route for drugs destined for other Central Asian states, Russia and Europe. Its government can point to many conferences and statements demonstrating resolve to combat narcotics, but there appears little to show for this effort. Uzbekistan’s borders remain poorly controlled by security forces that are inefficient at best and, at worst, corrupt.²⁷

Nevertheless, the key transport node linking Termez in Uzbekistan to Afghanistan across the Aru Darya river at the Afghan port of Hairaton still points to potential for opening up Afghanistan to regional trading opportunities. In the short to medium term this will assist the NDN, but in the longer term—and perhaps more importantly—this will be good for trade routes linking Europe and Russia with Asia. A rail link is being pushed slowly down this route to the Afghan northern city of Mazar-e Sharif, which will finally link Afghanistan’s Ring Road to Central Asian distribution networks. Many political, security and economics spoilers will hinder progress, however. A timeframe for Afghanistan to start to see any real benefit must be measured in years—probably decades—rather than months.

²⁵ CIA, *The World Factbook*, 24 June 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

²⁶ CIA, *The World Factbook*, 24 June 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

²⁷ Yasin Tuyluglu, M., ‘Drug trafficking in Uzbekistan’, see p. 25, ‘Tajikistan: major gateway for Afghan drugs’, *EurasiaCritic*, May 2010.

Prospects and impact

Uzbekistan's approach to the NDN—and indeed its support to Afghanistan as a whole—has been largely opportunistic in nature and characterised by the lack of capability to initiate anything of practical and tangible value. But the Uzbek regime looks to be playing its limited hand well. It has made considerable money from the US, flaunted its independence in the face of Russia and played the two powers off against each other. Additionally it has had its own interests served—with the international community in Afghanistan fighting the Taliban and attempting to counter narcotics trafficking.

However, Afghanistan's neighbours may increasingly have to contemplate a reduction in international effort in Afghanistan. Concurrent with a possible return of the Taliban to its borders, it is possible that Uzbekistan will look again to establish links with the less savoury face of Afghan powerbrokers, such as Dostum and other local warlords. This would help to provide a temporary (but not always controllable) buffer against Islamic militants but would probably not be ultimately in the best interests of Afghanistan.

Tajikistan*Overview*

Tajikistan's condition is depressingly similar to other Central Asian States that border Afghanistan. Corruption, repression and ineffectiveness characterise the regime. National leadership is limited, political opposition almost non-existent and there is much dependency on international aid. With growing internal tensions, all indications suggest that Tajikistan is unlikely to be a credible buffer against instability in the region for decades. Furthermore, Tajikistan's own unique additional problems—widespread poverty, fifty per cent unemployment and a fragile dependence upon remittances sent from the half of its workforce that is forced to seek employment in other countries—further bolster an International Crisis Group's recent and pessimistic assessment that:

Tajikistan is looking increasingly like its southern neighbour.²⁸

Its border with Afghanistan is long—approximately 1,200 kilometres—delineated in large part by the Panj River but also consisting of primarily rugged and inhospitable terrain unprotected by security forces. This makes it particularly porous and therefore attractive to narcotics traffickers, but also insurgents and criminals. At one point, as many as 25,000 Russian soldiers were in Tajikistan helping to protect the Tajikistan border with Afghanistan during the mid-1990s as Taliban advances progressed into northern Afghanistan. As these soldiers were gradually stood down

²⁸ International Crisis Group, 'Tajikistan, on the road to failure', *ICG Asia Report No. 162*, 12 Feb. 2009, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/162-tajikistan-on-the-road-to-failure.aspx>

and removed, the under-resourced and corrupt Tajik regime proved incapable of training and sustaining its own border security forces.

Although reliable data remains hard to come by, the number of ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan is actually greater than the number of Tajiks in Tajikistan, comprising over a quarter of Afghanistan's estimated total population of 29 million.²⁹

Relations with Afghanistan

Tajikistan was a participant by default in the Soviet Union's invasion and decade-long occupation of Afghanistan. In the 1990s, Tajikistan supported the Tajik-dominated anti-Taliban coalition, the Northern Alliance, which was led by perhaps the most famous ethnic Tajik Afghan of recent history, Ahmed Shah Massoud. In the 1980s, Massoud had fought the Soviet Army to a standstill from his stronghold in the Panshir valley, north east of Kabul. He then fought the advances of the Taliban until his assassination on 9 September, 2001 at the hands of an al Qaeda suicide bombing team. The military and financial support given to Massoud's ethnic Tajik successors by the US-led international coalition in late 2001 enabled the fall of the Taliban and a historically unprecedented dominance of Tajiks in the new Karzai interim government.

Tajikistan supported and continues to support the Karzai government. Hamid Karzai paid a goodwill visit to Tajikistan in July 2006. In August 2007, a \$37 billion bridge was opened over the river Panj, linking Tajikistan and Afghanistan, intended to develop trade and economic opportunities between the two countries.³⁰ However, given its own significant internal difficulties, direct aid and assistance from Tajikistan has been generally limited. There are no significant US or ISAF military basing facilities in Tajikistan (one small French contingent in Dushanbe). This is partly a result of Tajikistan's weak and limited infrastructure. ISAF military overflights are permitted and rail-bound NATO supplies also cross Tajikistan, although these have been disrupted by periodic water and energy resource disputes between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.³¹

Key issues

Narco-trafficking and the rise of the Taliban are important themes in Tajik-Afghan relations. Drug smuggling from Afghanistan through Tajikistan's very open border remains widespread, with little prospect that this will be systematically preventable—on either side of the border—any time soon. Poverty and unemployment in Tajikistan will continue to make trafficking an attractive career

²⁹ The CIA World Fact book indicates that, of an estimated total population in Tajikistan of 7.5 million, approximately 6 million are ethnically Tajik, whereas ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan form 27% of the total population of around 29 million in Afghanistan, i.e. around 7.8 million. CIA, *The World Factbook*, 24 June 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html> and <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ti.html>

³⁰ 'Tajikistan, Afghanistan open new border bridge', *Reuters*, 26 Aug. 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL2626148320070826>

³¹ Kozhevnikov, R., 'Central Asia dispute disrupts NATO Afghan supplies', *Reuters*, 26 May 2010, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LDE64P1KI.htm>

option for many Tajiks. One report suggests that up to 100 tonnes of heroin a year transits through Tajikistan, with a value equivalent to half the country's annual Gross Domestic Product.³² There has been recent optimism that the narcotics flow may be slowing, although this may well be due to temporary conditions—particularly a partial poppy crop failure in Afghanistan widely reported in 2010.³³

Fears that a 'Central Asian Taliban' is on the rise may still currently be overstated—certainly there do not appear to have been any significant incidents in and around the Tajik/Afghan border, but this may be only a matter of time, according to the International Crisis Group:

Perhaps the only reason that the Afghan border has remained quiet is because the Taliban have not yet reached the Panj River.³⁴

Prospects and impact

Afghanistan should not expect any significant, tangible support from Tajikistan, be it economic, financial, reconstruction or security. Tajikistan does not control its border with Afghanistan (nor large parts of its own interior, for that matter). Drugs, insurgents, criminals and refugees will remain able to pass more or less unchecked for some years to come. If the Taliban did arrive once again on the border, Tajik direct capabilities to protect itself would be limited and its desire to intervene minimal. However, support to anti-Taliban proxies, might form a limited liability option. In 2009, the International Crisis Group made a bleak judgement that:

If the international community must rely on Tajikistan to be a useful and productive ally, then Afghanistan is in serious trouble. Tajikistan is a weak state, teetering on the edge of failure, and things are likely only to get worse there.³⁵

This still looks to look to be a realistic assessment. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for in the short and medium term is that Tajikistan is able to avoid collapse and a further destabilisation of Afghanistan's borders.

³² Yasin Tuyluoglu, M., 'Drug trafficking in Uzbekistan', see p. 25, 'Tajikistan: major gateway for Afghan drugs', *EurasiaCritic*, May 2010.

³³ Kozhevnikov, R., 'Tajikistan sees decline in Afghan drug volumes', 28 July 2010, *Reuters*, <http://alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LDE66RIQL.htm>

³⁴ International Crisis Group, 'Tajikistan, on the road to failure', *ICG Asia Report No. 162*, 12 Feb. 2009, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/162-tajikistan-on-the-road-to-failure.aspx>

³⁵ Quinn-Judge, P., 'Tajikistan: On the Pot-holed Road to Failed-State Status', *International Crisis Group*, 19 Feb. 2009, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/tajikistan-on-the-pot-holed-road-to-failed-state-status.aspx>

5. Pakistan

India is a close friend of Afghanistan but Pakistan is a brother of Afghanistan. Pakistan is a twin brother. We are conjoined twins, there's no separation.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, on a visit to Pakistan in April 2010.

In more than eight years I have never met a senior Pakistani military officer who believed the West could prevail in Afghanistan and they have formulated their policies on that basis.³⁶

BBC Correspondent, Owen Bennett-Jones, August 2010.

Overview

If Afghanistan and Pakistan are brothers, then they are brothers who are frequently arguing, sometimes fighting and with the younger brother continually attempting to dominate the older. The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the most complex, controversial and difficult of all Afghanistan's neighbour relationships. Pakistan's support for the Taliban in the 1990s (and alleged continued support for them since 2001), its frequently violent relationship with India, its willingness to sponsor terrorism and its tendency to flip from military dictatorship to weak and corrupt civilian rule and back again, make Pakistan unattractive as a neighbour. It is difficult to underestimate the role played by India in determining and driving Pakistan's policies towards Afghanistan. But it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the direction of the Afghanistan/Pakistan relationship, whether positive or negative, will ultimately determine Afghanistan's own future direction.

Although Pakistan arguably played an extremely positive role in assisting the Afghan Mujahideen fighters to eject the Soviet occupation force between 1979 and 1989, since the 1990s, Pakistan has routinely been presented as a major contributor to Afghanistan's post-Soviet instability. But it is not merely Pakistan's own regional adventurism that is now judged to be causing problems, but its own internal political, military and economic difficulties. In 2009, the SIPRI Yearbook noted:

Pakistan continues to pose the most immediate challenge to Afghanistan's development, suffering from a faltering economy, weak government and increasing fundamentalism. . . . There are numerous credible claims that there is still support for the Taliban within the Pakistani military and intelligence circles. . . . the new civilian government's ability to deal with numerous security problems looks weak.³⁷

Many analysts would go further than this, suggesting that it is Pakistan and not Afghanistan that is the main problem for the region.

Relations with Afghanistan

³⁶ Bennett-Jones, O., 'Zardari's heavy political baggage', *BBC News*, 6 Aug. 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8889000/8889056.stm

³⁷ Foxley, T., 'Security and Politics in Afghanistan', *SIPRI Yearbook 2009: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009), p. 170.

In terms of age of nationhood, Afghanistan is the senior partner, achieving nation status in 1747. Pakistan was to secure independence from India exactly 200 years later, in 1947. The region now known as Afghanistan shares close tribal, religious, cultural, economic and historic ties with the region now known as Pakistan. Pakistan has the longest border of all Afghanistan's neighbours, at 2,430 kilometres in length. Most of this terrain is extreme and inhospitable, ranging from remote desert in the south to mountain ranges along the centre and north. The Afghan and Pakistani populations spill over these still poorly defined borders, none more prominently and controversially than the Pushtun tribes of southern and eastern Afghanistan and northern and western Pakistan.

These tribes were arbitrarily separated into Afghan and Pakistani tribes by a border (the Durand Line) created as a result of the British Empire's political decision to create a defensible line against perceived Russian empire encroachment in the 18th and 19th centuries. Pushtun tribes on both sides refuse to recognise this as a valid border and come and go—be they tribesmen, smugglers, traders or insurgents—across the land as they wish. Although this is the formally accepted international border between the two countries, the Afghan government still does not officially recognise it. In the early 1960s, Afghanistan and Pakistan clashed militarily over the idea of a 'Pushtunistan' that might unify the Pushtuns on terms favourable to Afghanistan.

When the Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan became a safe haven for millions of Afghan refugees who were attempting to escape the conflict. Many stayed with their extended families on the other side of the border; others had to be accommodated in numerous refugee camps. This was a significant financial and political strain on Pakistan.

More significantly, however, Pakistan took the decision to support an Afghan insurgency against the Soviet Army and slowly built up a covert programme that provided training, funding, weapons, ammunition and strategic guidance for Afghan groups based in Pakistan that wanted to fight back against Soviet forces. This initiative, covert and deniable, was supported by the CIA, who also contributed weapons (most notably the effective anti-aircraft missile system, the Stinger) and money, to be funnelled through the Pakistani Inter Service Intelligence agency—the ISI—who were running the 'hands-on' support for the Mujahideen.

There were seven main Afghan resistance groups of differing political and religious persuasions. Pakistani efforts usually ended up providing the best and most regular support to those groups and commanders who most followed Pakistani—essentially ISI—direction. Long-term relationships were developed between ISI officers and these Islamic resistance leaders: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani—now both very prominent insurgent commanders fighting against the Karzai government and the ISAF military forces—were particular ISI favourites.³⁸ These relationships were further developed into the 1990s and most likely have not yet been terminated.

When the Soviet Army withdrew from Afghanistan, Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan shifted. The Pakistani strategic goal became that of attempting to create, from amongst the various competing ex-Mujahideen groups, a regime in Afghanistan that would be favourable to Pakistan and resistant to Indian influences. Such a regime would allow Pakistan the so-called 'strategic depth' and secure western flank that it felt it needed in the event of any new confrontation with India.

³⁸ Yousaf, M., and Adkin, M., *The Beartrap*, (Leo Cooper: London, 1992).

In pursuit of this goal, Pakistani military and intelligence services started to support the fledgling Sunni Taliban movement that was emerging from the Pushtun tribes of southern Afghanistan.³⁹ Most of the original Taliban leaders were Afghan Pushtuns experienced in fighting the Soviets. Other Taliban fighters came from the refugee camps still in existence in north-west Pakistan or were students who had been trained in the Madrassa religious schools in the same parts of Pakistan.⁴⁰

Taliban military successes in the mid-1990s appeared to owe much to the support provided by Middle Eastern backers, such as Saudi Arabia, but mainly the ISI and the Pakistani government. A further contributing factor was that the international community—and particularly the United States—had for the most part lost interest in the region. From a US government perspective, the Islamic Mujahideen had served its purpose in defeating the Soviets and the country was now in a civil war in which the US had little interest in backing any side. Between 1995 and 1998 the Taliban were able to advance out of the Pushtun-dominated south and into western and northern Afghanistan. Herat fell in 1995, Kabul in 1996 and Mazar-e Sharif in 1997. As the Taliban moved their way further north, they fought a collection of Tajik, Uzbek and Shia resistance groups solidifying around the Northern Alliance, led by Ahmed Shah Massoud. The Northern Alliance was supported—in much the same way that the ISI were supporting the Taliban—by Iran, Russia, most of the Central Asian States and India, confirming Afghanistan's role as an arena in which Pakistan and India played out their rivalry.

Nevertheless, the support for the Northern Alliance notwithstanding, by the end of the 1990s, the Taliban controlled 90% of the country, with the exception of the north-eastern region, which was predominantly an ethnically Tajik area held by the Northern Alliance. The Taliban regime, however, was only ever officially recognised by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which clearly gives strong indications as to just who was supporting their military effort. In 1996, a Saudi former Mujahideen fighter, Osama Bin Laden, moved to Afghanistan. He had fought alongside many of the Taliban during the Jihad against the Soviets and was now attracting international attention for preaching global Jihad. He was permitted safe haven in Afghanistan and protected by the Taliban. In 2001, Pakistani support for the Taliban and Taliban support for Bin Laden was to have a massive and unexpected consequence for Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the resultant and the near instantaneous international spotlight that was directed onto Afghanistan and the region, attention was focused on Pakistan's support for the Taliban and, by strong implication, its role in indirectly allowing safe haven to Osama Bin Laden. The then President, Pervez Musharraf was essentially given a stark ultimatum by the Bush administration amounting to 'you're either with us or against us'. Pakistan was expected immediately to turn against the organisation it was grooming to dominate Afghanistan on Pakistani terms. Pakistan, on pain of losing credibility and funding from the United States, was being required to cut its ties with the Taliban, arresting those it could and help the international community to defeat the Taliban. This was a disaster for Musharraf and the ISI.

The extent to which the Pakistani regime was genuinely committed to the new anti-Taliban policy that had been forced upon it, and the level to which the policy was effectively carried out, has been a major point of political and analytical debate since

³⁹ Coll, S., *Ghost Wars*, (Penguin Books Ltd: London, 2005).

⁴⁰ For one of the best accounts of the rise of the Taliban movement and the Pakistani relationship with it, see Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001).

2001. Many analysts believe that Pakistan did not entirely sever its ties with the Taliban, has done the bare minimum necessary to convince the international community and is aware of—and permits—the continuing presence of Taliban leaders and fighters within Pakistan. Pakistan recognised quite early on that the US depends upon Pakistan for assistance in locating al Qaeda in Pakistan and also for the logistical routes that supply ISAF forces in Afghanistan. In essence, Pakistan has co-operated in the hunt for al Qaeda, as this is a threat to Pakistan as well, it has fought against the Pakistani Taliban, as this is also a threat, but the Afghan Taliban, sheltering around Quetta in Baluchistan remain broadly untouched. A high-risk balancing act intended to keep open all options has therefore been attempted.

But Pakistan's relationship with the new post-2001 Afghanistan regime has therefore been strained, despite much talk of the professed close bonds and common interests of the two countries.⁴¹ Numerous diplomatic spats have blighted political progress, with both sides guilty of overplaying suspicions about the other. Border disputes—and even armed confrontation—have not been uncommon, even despite the establishment of a US, Afghanistan and Pakistan tri-lateral commission to resolve such issues and develop confidence measures and information sharing. But Afghanistan's deep-rooted suspicion that Pakistan is still aiding the Taliban remains a major cause of tension.⁴²

A recent trade transit agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan allows Afghan produce to travel through Pakistan to Indian markets.⁴³ Perhaps inevitably, there is no reciprocal opportunity for India goods to flow back into Afghanistan. This is an encouraging—and long overdue—step in the right direction of opening trade routes within the region. Although a much needed pointer of the right direction, such agreements are few and far between and this particular deal comes after nearly four decades of negotiation.⁴⁴

Key issues

Pakistan's own stability

The stability of Pakistan itself remains a significant concern for analysts, diplomats and politicians alike. These schools of thought suggest that Pakistan is perhaps a bigger problem than Afghanistan is itself. Amongst the major concerns are Pakistan's weak economy, its possession of a nuclear arsenal, the rise of a destabilising 'Talibanisation' in the north and west, ineffectual and corrupt civil governance, ethnic divisions. To cap it all, a strong military effectively controls foreign policy and sees

⁴¹ 'Musharraf-Karzai for further strengthening bilateral ties', *PakTribune*, 7 Sep. 2006, <http://www.paktribune.com/news/index.shtml?153465>

⁴² 'Musharraf, Karzai Avoid Eye Contact, Handshake During Bush Dinner', *Associated Press*, 28 Sep. 2006, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,216222,00.html>

⁴³ 'Afghanistan and Pakistan agree key trade agreement', 19 July 2010, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10679464>

⁴⁴ 'Afghanistan and Pakistan agree key trade agreement', 19 July 2010, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10679464>

everything through the anticipation of military confrontation with India. This, they say, is a recipe for the country to implode.⁴⁵

Pakistan always seems to be able to draw back from oft-predicted disaster—usually with the injection of more international aid or the death of one more key Pakistani Taliban leader. But it is difficult to rule out the dangers to the region from a Pakistan that either over-reaches itself in foreign policy adventurism—such as the Kargil conflict with India in 1999—or is unable to provide the necessary civil and societal infrastructure to meet the growing demands of its own populace, even for such situations as natural disasters.⁴⁶

India

Pakistan's engagement in and with Afghanistan is determined in large part by its relationship with India. Pakistan channels billions of dollars every year into creating and maintaining a large conventional army that sits on the Indo-Pakistani border. This is an expensive 'Cold War'-style confrontation. The two nations have fought three conventional conflicts since Pakistan gained its independence in 1947 and an unconventional conflict in Kashmir. 'Strategic Depth' is the term most often used to describe Pakistan's concern that, with a powerful rival to its east, a nightmare scenario would be for India to 'encircle' Pakistan with political and military influence to its west as well. India and Pakistan confronted each other in Afghanistan in the 1990s, with India backing the Northern Alliance and Pakistan funding and arming the Taliban.

The majority of Indian activity in Afghanistan since 2001 has been benign and intended only to support the development of stable, prosperous and independent Afghanistan. Indian assets have attracted terrorist attacks in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan remains suspicious—to the point of paranoia—about any of the Indian activities in Afghanistan, and fears the role of Indian money and intelligence activity. Pakistan regularly claims that Indian consulates established in Afghanistan are little more than bases for India's intelligence organisation, the Regional Analysis Wing—RAW.⁴⁷

But, regardless of whether Pakistan's fears are overstated or not (and RAW is almost certainly to be operating in Afghanistan, just as the ISI is) Pakistani political and military decision-making is disproportionately based on the expectation of confrontation with India. Closer relations with India and a resolution of key areas of friction—Kashmir and the Mumbai terrorist attack, for example, would greatly improve the political, economic and, above security, outlook for Afghanistan. However, such a significant shift can only come very slowly. We should not expect any major breakthrough in the next five to ten years.

⁴⁵ Cropsey, S., 'Will There Always Be a Pakistan?', *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 11 Dec. 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/15/will_there_always_be_a_pakistan

⁴⁶ Waraich, O., 'As New Rains Threaten, Flooded Pakistan's Anger Grows', *TIME Magazine*, 3 Aug. 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2008412,00.html>

⁴⁷ 'India has established Pakistan-specific Consulates in Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat and filled these up with RAW agents'. For a good example of the sort of suspicion and paranoia felt by Pakistan, see the editorial by Malik, Z., 'India encircles Pakistan', *Pakistan Observer*, 5 Aug. 2010, <http://pakobserver.net/detailnews.asp?id=43390>

The Afghan Taliban

Whether Pakistan is merely struggling and failing to prevent the Taliban gaining safe haven inside Pakistan or whether it is providing more proactive and malign support is still a source of much debate. But Pakistan had a clear track record of supporting the Taliban in the 1990s and there is strong logic—from a Pakistani political and military perspective—in having a pro-Pakistan, and ideally Pushtun, client state on its western border.

Afghanistan and the international community remain very suspicious about the role Pakistan may still be playing in allowing the Taliban to operate in Afghanistan from the apparent relative safety of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. Indications of Pakistani collusion are strong and, convincingly, come from a range of different sources:

Pakistani military forces flew repeated helicopter missions into Afghanistan to resupply the Taliban during a fierce battle in June 2007, according to a U.S. Marine lieutenant colonel, who says his information is based on multiple U.S. and Afghan intelligence reports.⁴⁸

But 'smoking gun' evidence remains elusive—or might even be too embarrassing for the US and allies to fully expose, given the international community's reliance on Pakistan for the hunt for al Qaeda. Anecdotes and reported incidents of Pakistan support—or, at least, a failure to act against the Taliban—are widespread. The ISI are routinely accused:

Many accounts of the Afghan conflict misapprehend the nature of the relationship between Pakistan's security services and the insurgency. The relationship, in fact, goes far beyond contact and coexistence, with some assistance provided by elements within, or linked to, Pakistan's intelligence service (ISI) or military... Pakistan's apparent involvement in a double game of this scale could have major geopolitical implications and could even provoke US counter-measures.⁴⁹

One of the most recent criticisms of Pakistan in this regard came from UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, who spoke of the export of terror by Pakistan to both India and Afghanistan.⁵⁰

But Pakistan has its own powerful insurgents to deal with—what journalist and writer Ahmed Rashid has called the Pakistani Taliban, but who are also known as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan—the TTP. With a distinct identity, separate, but supportive of the Afghan Taliban under Mullah Omar, the TTP represented a coming together of the more radicalised elements of local tribes who had previously sympathised with or supported the Afghan Taliban. The TTP has dominated the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan, held the Swat valley for several months at one point and

⁴⁸ Naylor, S., 'US Officer: Pakistani Forces Aided Taliban', *DefenseNews*, 19 Sep. 2008, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=3733901>

⁴⁹ Waldman, M., 'The Sun in the Sky: the Relationship Between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents', *Crisis States Research Centre Discussion Paper No. 18*, June 2010, <http://www.crisisstates.com/Publications/dp/dp18.htm>

⁵⁰ Millard, R., 'Cameron defends Pakistan terror comments', *AFP*, 3 Aug. 2010, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ir7t-JxGy9K0w6etju95jrGo9KuQ>

forced the Pakistani government into humiliating peace deals. The TTP has made any form of local government control next to impossible, inflicted many casualties on Pakistani security forces and ensured that safe havens for the Afghan Taliban will continue. It is not unknown for the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to co-operate.⁵¹

The Durand Line, Pushtunistan and the Pushtun tribal areas

The border drawn up between Afghanistan and Pakistan, based on the British Empire's Durand Line, is porous and goes unrecognised by the tribes that are divided by it.⁵² It is likely to remain a cause of friction between Afghanistan and Pakistan for years. Rejecting the artificiality of the Durand Line, Afghanistan has, in the past, favoured a 'Pushtunistan' solution:

... an independent state for the Pushto-speaking peoples south and east of the Durand Line on the Pakistan side... Such a state would naturally be expected to align itself closely with Afghanistan, but would not be a part of it. In the imagination of the Afghan cartographers, at least, this has already been accomplished, for the tourist guides issued to visitors clearly mark Pakistan's tribal territories as 'Pushtunistan'.⁵³

Any form of Pushtunistan risks undermining the territorial integrity of Pakistan. But, even though such a development looks unlikely, the current Afghan leadership still rejects the Durand Line—even though a clearly defined and agreed border would greatly aid border security on both sides. President Karzai—himself a Pushtun—remains reluctant to agree to what would amount to the formal and final divisions of the Pushtun tribes.

The Pushtun border areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been dismissed simplistically as 'lawless' by some or described as having their own very specifically codified, but informal, set of laws by others (i.e. the Pushtunwali code). The latter is perhaps more appropriate. Either way, the unique history, culture and characteristics of the Pushtuns make them fierce fighters and resistance to any efforts to incorporate them into national, or even regional, governance. The area is largely out of the reach of international and Pakistani military pressure and the Pushtunwali code holds that, on pain of death, one must provide sanctuary and safety to guests. Furthermore, the remoteness and inaccessibility of these areas in Pakistan contribute to making the area a very attractive 'safe haven' for insurgent groups such as the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Regional experts Thomas Johnson and Chris Mason suggests an large increase of development aid into these tribal areas would be a much more plausible means of reducing Jihadi fervour than the current US policy of pumping millions of dollars into the Pakistani Army's distinctly unobtrusive operations in the FATA. They note:

There remains a foundation on which Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other interested parties can begin to restore traditional Pashtun power structures and mores... Ultimately, the fate of the

⁵¹ Walsh, D., 'Pakistani troops missing after cross-border Afghan Taliban raid', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jun/16/pakistani-troops-missing-taliban-raid>

⁵² 'In short, the Durand Line is accepted as a valid legal boundary by almost no one in the border region', Johnson, T. and Mason, C., 'No sign until the burst of fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier', *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Spring 2008, p. 69, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/18241/no_sign_until_the_burst_of_fire.html.

⁵³ Griffiths, J., *Afghanistan*, (Pall Mall Press: London, 1967), p. 51.

Pashtun tribal territories will prove to be the ultimate test of US and NATO abilities. Should they fail, the consequences for the Pashtun, Afghanistan, Pakistan—and the West—will be far worse than anything previously endured.⁵⁴

Prospects and impact

For all the talk of ‘brotherhood’ between the two nations, it is quite clear that Afghanistan and Pakistan do not yet fully trust each other. Most of the suspicion is directed from Afghanistan towards Pakistan over the role of Pakistani intentions and support for the Taliban. But historic differences, such as the Durand Line, also rub shoulders with the recent (and perhaps more pressing), disputes over the role of Pakistan in supporting a virulent insurgency inside Afghanistan.

Pakistan would clearly prefer a Pushtun-dominated and passive client state. Afghanistan clearly has no immediate desire to fill this role, although ISAF troop withdrawals are highlighting Afghanistan’s dilemma. If it is to be left to fend for itself in the not too distant future, it may need to reconcile itself with the Taliban in some way. Pakistan may yet be able to manoeuvre itself into the position of ‘broker’ that could facilitate such talks and re-insert itself—almost certainly unhelpfully—into Afghan internal affairs. But it is certainly difficult to escape the conclusion that a politically and economically independent Afghanistan would not ultimately be in Pakistan’s best interests. As the Economist notes:

Despite its robust action against the Pakistani Taliban, there is scant evidence that the Pakistani army has fundamentally changed its policy towards Afghan insurgents. Most believe that it has little reason now to turn on the Taliban and the Haqqani networks, given that the Afghan war seems to be reaching an end-game which could give the insurgents some measure of power.⁵⁵

Economically, Afghanistan would provide competition with Pakistani goods and services. Politically, Afghanistan would no longer provide the ‘strategic depth’ so desired by a Pakistani military blinded by all other considerations than an Indian military threat.

The two countries do not appear to be able to resolve these disagreements in the near term and the efforts of the international community to bring the two together, frequently appear clumsy, patronising and ill-informed, such as the US pronouncement of the need for an ‘AfPak’ regional solution. But overshadowing all, is Pakistan’s fragile and equally suspicion-filled relationship with India, who also retains a strong interest in Afghanistan and will be happy to see Pakistani ambitions frustrated there.

There are no obvious and easy answers and many potential dead ends. Afghanistan is still trying to find its feet with its future unclear. It is in the midst of an existential struggle, for which Pakistan must bear a significant part of the blame. Pakistan’s civilian government is weak and ineffectual and still too dependent upon the

⁵⁴ Johnson, T. and Mason, C., ‘No sign until the burst of fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier’, *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Spring 2008, p. 77, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/18241/no_sign_until_the_burst_of_fire.html

⁵⁵ ‘America, Afghanistan and Pakistan: Kayani’s gambit’, *The Economist*, 29 July 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/16693723>

patronage of its powerful army and intelligence organisations, rather than the other way around. The Pakistani military will therefore continue to dominate foreign policy decision-making. This guarantees a focus on confronting Indian influence wherever it feels it to be—this includes Afghanistan. The path of this relationship is going to be rocky for many years.

6. India

*Afghanistan has been a prize that Pakistan and India have fought over directly and indirectly for decades.*⁵⁶

Robert Kaplan, July 2008.

Overview

Although often analytically unhelpful, it continues to be necessary to see India's relationship with Afghanistan in the context of its more fraught relationship with Pakistan. India and Pakistan have fought three conventional wars between themselves, since 1947, not to mention a proxy insurgency conflict in Kashmir. The major terrorist incident in Mumbai in November 2008, which Indians widely believed was perpetrated by the ISI, constituted a major setback in Indo-Pakistani relations and served to undermine prospects for peaceful co-operation in Afghanistan. India has many legitimate interests inside Afghanistan, but the fear and suspicion evident in equal amounts between India and Pakistan make it likely that Afghanistan will remain an area where the interests of both countries will continue to clash. From the Pakistani perspective, India is conspiring to undermine Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and using a combination of soft power and intelligence assets to erode its own efforts to achieve 'strategic depth' as defence against a militarily more superior India. For the time being, the rivalry between the two countries will, more often than not, be an unhelpful brake on Afghanistan's development.

Relations with Afghanistan

There has been an Indian diaspora living in Afghanistan for centuries. Despite the decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the associated conflict, in 1990, reporting suggested that there still might have been as many as 45,000 people of Indian descent living in Afghanistan. After a further decade of civil war in Afghanistan, the Taliban's repression of Hindus and Sikhs, and continued instability following the US-led military intervention, this figure appears to have dwindled to has little as 1,000.⁵⁸

Following the Soviet invasion, India recognised the Soviet-backed government, which was engaged in fighting the Pakistani and US-backed Mujahideen fighters. It recognised several short-lived Afghan governments that emerged from the messy civil war, but not the Taliban regime. Alongside Iran and Russia, it played a significant role in supporting the anti-Taliban coalition, the Northern Alliance, during the civil war. In December 2001, it recognised the Hamid Karzai-led interim government and, since the fall of the Taliban regime, has provided millions of dollars

⁵⁶ Kaplan, D., 'Behind the Indian Embassy Bombing', *The Atlantic*, July 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/08/behind-the-indian-embassy-bombing/6949/>

⁵⁷ Kaplan, D., 'Behind the Indian Embassy Bombing', *The Atlantic*, July 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/08/behind-the-indian-embassy-bombing/6949/>

⁵⁸ 'Report of the High level Committee on the Indian Diaspora', www.indiandiaspora.nic.in/diasporapdf/chapter2.pdf

of aid and assistance to the new Afghan government. As at July 2009, one report suggested that a total of \$1.2 billion had been provided for reconstruction in Afghanistan, making India the largest regional donor.⁵⁹

Key issues

The security of Indian activities and interests in Afghanistan is a major concern. India has around 3 – 4,000 construction workers in Afghanistan, an embassy in Kabul and four consulates in Mazar-e Sharif, Kandahar, Herat and Jalalabad. In 2006, approximately two hundred Indo-Tibetan Border Police forces were sent to Afghanistan in order to protect these workers. The consulates are routinely decried by Pakistani government and media alike as nothing more than intelligence outposts for RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), India's intelligence service.⁶⁰

Protecting India's diplomatic and economic assets in Afghanistan is a major issue. India is very concerned about Pakistani intentions in Afghanistan, specifically the extent to which its ISI intelligence service may still be providing support for the Taliban and even directing Taliban assets to attack Indian targets in Afghanistan. In July 2008, a suicide bomb attack against the Indian embassy killed over 40.⁶¹ In October 2009, a similar attack killed seventeen.⁶²

Indian economic and trade initiatives with Afghanistan are a work in progress. Road construction, pipelines and transmission line initiatives all form part of India's efforts to reach around and across Pakistan and into resource-rich Central Asia through new trading routes. In January 2009, a 215 kilometre-long highway from Delaram to Zaranj built by Indian workers was opened by India's Minister for External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee in the presence of Afghan president Karzai.⁶³ The route opens up the Afghan Ring Road in south-western Afghanistan to Iran and the Iranian port of Chabahar, removing Indian dependency upon Pakistani roads and the Pakistani port of Gwadar.

Prospects and impact

An improving relationship between India and Pakistan is crucial to the stable development of Afghanistan. But, as long as both parties continue to distrust the intentions of the other, Afghanistan is likely to remain one more arena for them to play out their own regional 'Cold War'. This will, in particular, take the form of the use of intelligence assets and covert support to favoured ethnic and political groupings within the country. India has traditionally favoured the non-Pushtun ethnic

⁵⁹ Bajoria, J., 'India-Afghanistan Relations', *Council on Foreign Relations, Background Paper*, 22 July 2009, http://www.cfr.org/publication/17474/indiaafghanistan_relations.html

⁶⁰ Ahsan, M., "'RAW Is Training 600 Baluchis In Afghanistan": Mushahid Hussain', *Boloji.com*, 20 July 2010, <http://www.boloji.com/analysis2/0116.htm>

⁶¹ BBC, 'Bomb rocks India embassy in Kabul', *BBC News*, 7 July 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7492601.stm

⁶² Walsh, D., 'Deadly Kabul bomb targets Indian embassy', *The Guardian*, 8 Oct. 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/08/kabul-bomb-indian-embassy>

⁶³ 'India hands over Zaranj-Delaram highway to Afghanistan', *Pakistan Defence*, 23 Jan. 2009, <http://www.defence.pk/forums/world-affairs/20318-india-hands-over-zaranj-delaram-highway-afghanistan.html>

groups—Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara—of the former Northern Alliance. In the event of a deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, India may well revert to its previous types of support (money, weapons, intelligence) as a counter-weight against the support they would perceive that Pakistan would be giving to its favoured group, the ethnically Pushtun Taliban. This will be to the detriment of Afghanistan and could be even disastrous.

Although a clear and complete resolution of the long-running disputes and tensions between the two is unlikely in the near future—certainly not in the next five to ten years—even an slight warming of relations will be of benefit. The recent trade agreement, brokered by the US, enabling Afghanistan a land route for its goods and produce to India through Pakistan, is an example of one small piece of a process that might slowly increase confidence and build co-operation between these two major regional powers. But such a trade deal, however encouraging, also gives indication the numerous hurdles still left to be cleared. Pakistan and India are both competing for the Afghan market. The recent trade deal currently only permits a one way flow of goods out of Afghanistan. It does not allow for Indian goods and services to flow into Afghanistan.⁶⁴

The international community will need to maintain strong and long-term pressure to ensure that tensions are minimised, outstanding grievances are addressed calmly (and at the negotiating table) and their engagements in Afghanistan remain as benign and constructive as possible. Unfortunately, the international community has a tendency to drift away at critical times.

⁶⁴ Dawn, 'Pakistan trade deal a major step, says Afghanistan', *quoting Reuters*, 19 July 2010, <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/03-pakistan-trade-deal-a-major-step-says-afghanistan-ss-01>

7. Iran

*For Iranian nationalists regardless of religiosity, Afghanistan is Iran's near-abroad...The history of Iran and Afghanistan are intertwined. From an Iranian perspective, Afghan independence is the result only of British interference and an accident of history.*⁶⁵

Michael Rubin, June 2007

Overview

The region now known as Iran has had very strong cultural and linguistic links with the area now known as Afghanistan—in particular, Western Afghanistan and the city of Herat—for thousands of years. The eastern dialect of the Iranian language, Farsi, is called Dari and is spoken by approximately half of the Afghan population. Iran's border with Afghanistan is approximately 940 kilometres long and predominantly desert. Nearly 20 per cent of the Afghan population follow the same interpretation of Islam—Shia—that Iran does and they are located for the most part in Western and Central Afghanistan.

Instability and conflict emanating from Afghanistan has been a major concern for, and a cause of great cost to, Iran for several decades. Refugees, drug-trafficking and, since the mid-1990s, the rise of the Sunni Taliban, have been a significant drain on Iranian resources. Iranian strategy now, in relation to Afghanistan, is threefold. As a priority, Iran seeks to minimise the causes and impact of such instability. Secondly, Iran wants to ensure the development of an Afghan regime friendly towards Iran and sympathetic to Iranian agendas and concerns. Thirdly, Iran wants to contribute to the reconstruction and regeneration of Afghanistan in a way that aids Iranian economic, trade and political interests.

The stance Iran adopts in relation to Afghanistan is complex and multi-faceted, with its endeavours sometimes contradictory. In 2006, the Afghanistan expert, William Maley, wrote:

...Iran has hitherto been a cooperative and constructive actor in Afghanistan, but an angry Iranian regime could easily find unofficial channels through which to pursue a spoiler campaign.⁶⁶

This is broadly accurate and a helpful summary of the position Iran finds itself in—Iran has much to gain from a stable Afghanistan that enables trade and economic development between (and through) the two countries. Most of its activity and engagement with Afghanistan has been mature, pragmatic, responsible and helpful.⁶⁷ But Iran calibrates its activities in Afghanistan based on wider strategic contexts, for example its relationship with the international community—and the United States in

⁶⁵ Rubin, M., 'Understanding Iranian Strategy in Afghanistan', presentation to the Royal Danish Defence College and RAND, 14 June 2007, http://www.aei.org/docLib/20070801_RubinRDDCspeech.pdf

⁶⁶ Maley, W., *Rescuing Afghanistan*, (C. Hurst and Co: London, 2006), p. 108.

⁶⁷ 'Iran aid to Afghanistan at \$280mn', *Press TV*, 9 Mar. 2010, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=120440§ionid=351020101>

particular. Large American military contingents in Iraq, on Iran's western border, and in Afghanistan on its eastern border, have, for nearly a decade, created much suspicion in Tehran regarding the motives of the international community.

But Maley's judgement in 2006 looks to be a relatively benign interpretation of Iran's recent (the last nine years) activities and intentions. Although Iran looks strongly to prefer political solutions, many international analysts, politicians and military personnel judge that Iran has already identified the 'spoilers' it needs and, in some cases, may even be making use of them.⁶⁸

Iran now has to contemplate the starting of an international military withdrawal, with, from Iranian eyes, the job only partially complete. There is even the prospect of some form of Taliban political return over the next few years. Iran may judge that further efforts—including what some might describe as 'spoilers'—will be needed to try to shape Afghanistan in the ways Iran believes it requires.

Relations with Afghanistan

Iran clashed unsuccessfully with the British over spheres of influence in Afghanistan in the 19th century. However, throughout the bulk of the 20th century, the Afghan and Iranian relationship was broadly benign, including a Treaty of Friendship in 1921. Iran has no outstanding claim to Afghan territory (although Iranian schoolbooks have been known to count the Afghan province of Herat as an Iranian province). From the 1970s, however, Iran became increasingly critical of the increasing Soviet dominance within the Afghan government.⁶⁹ During the Soviet occupation, from 1979 to 1989 it provide some weapons, shelter and support for predominantly Shia resistance groups, but nothing like the scale of support then being provided by the US and Pakistan.

During the 1990s, fearful of Pakistani and Saudi support for the Sunni Taliban movement and the territorial gains the Taliban were making, Iran, alongside Russia, the Central Asia States and India, supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Iran provided money, weapons and political support. Within this group were Iran's key Afghan constituents, the Shia Moslems, in particular the Hazara ethnic group from western and central Afghanistan. The Hazaras were regularly and systematically persecuted by the Taliban. The well being of this ethnic and religious group will remain a key concern for Iran in the future. Support for the Northern Alliance coalition as a whole also served to demonstrate that Iran was broadening its support base within Afghanistan beyond simply the followers of the Shia Moslem faith (who anyway lacked much political, military or economic capital). The intention was and is to maximise options for influence in the country.

Relations between Iran and Afghanistan in the 1990s have clearly been tense and difficult. In 1998, following the murder of Iranian diplomats in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif, the Iranian army massed on the border with Afghanistan and there were fears even that an Iranian punitive military incursion might take place.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Clark, K., 'Iran "sending weapons to Taleban"', *BBC News*, 15 Sep. 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7616429.stm

⁶⁹ Rubin, M., 'Understanding Iranian Strategy in Afghanistan', presentation to the Royal Danish Defence College and RAND, 14 June 2007, http://www.aei.org/docLib/20070801_RubinRDDCspeech.pdf

⁷⁰ 'Iran warns of major conflict', *BBC News*, 14 Sep. 1998, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/170705.stm

With this as the backdrop, Iran initially proved very supportive to the US-led military force that ejected the Taliban regime in late 2001. Evidence suggests that Iranian and American intelligence operatives even co-operated on the ground in Afghanistan, before President Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech returned the US/Iran relationship to mutual suspicion and hostility.⁷¹

Iran has genuine and legitimate interests in Afghanistan. It has been supportive of the Karzai regime and has certainly pushed much money and investment into western Afghanistan, building or repairing roads and energy networks as well as other infrastructure. It recognises that the application of this form of 'soft power' can be very influential and effective—and low risk. A stable Afghanistan would provide a new market for Iranian goods. Most recently, foundations for a long-mooted (since the 1970s) railway that would link Turkey and north-eastern Iran to Herat are under construction, although completion may still be a decade away.⁷²

Key issues

Relations with the International Community and the United States

Iran remains very uneasy about the presence of the US and Western political and military presence to its west and east. It fears long-term US dominance in Afghanistan and has played out its fears and suspicions in its relationship with Afghanistan, which have suffered as a result. In 2005, Tehran delayed an official state visit by Karzai to Tehran because Karzai would not sign an Iranian-drafted non-interference treaty that the US did not agree with. In 2006, the US similarly prevented a Karzai visit to Tehran.⁷³ The issue of international sanctions and action against Iranian development and use nuclear technology is likely to be part of the overall Iranian calculation of what it will—or will not—do in Afghanistan.

Iran is also suspicious of Pakistani intentions in Afghanistan. It blames Pakistan and the US for the creation of the Taliban in the 1990s and would like to ensure that it has 'options' within Afghanistan—to hold influence with political, military and religious leaders and groups that it judges may be useful in furthering Iranian interests.⁷⁴ In addition to its priority group of Shia Moslems—Shia religious leader, Mohammed Mohaqeq, has been a beneficiary of Iranian funding and support—actors within the Pushtun community are also courted. During the 1990s, safe haven was given to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Pushtun religious extremist, currently fighting alongside the Taliban, and there are clues here to a more dangerous game that Iran might be playing.

⁷¹ 'Bush State of the Union address', *CNN*, 29 Jan. 2002, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/01/29/bush.speech.txt/>

⁷² Motevalli, G., 'Iranian engineer brings roads, rail to Afghan west', *Reuters*, 17 Apr. 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE63G0LF20100417>

⁷³ Rubin, B., 'Afghanistan's Uncertain transition From Turmoil to Normalcy', *Council on Foreign Relations paper, Council Special Report No. 12*, Mar. 2006, http://www.cfr.org/publication/10273/afghanistans_uncertain_transition_from_turmoil_to_normalcy.html

⁷⁴ Rohde, D., 'Iran Is Seeking More Influence in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 27 Dec. 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/27/world/asia/27afghan.ready.html>

Iran is torn between its dislike of the Taliban and its dislike of the large US military presence that is currently combating the Taliban. The international community has been getting increasingly concerned—to the point of voicing these concerns pointedly and publicly—that weapons emanating from Iran are ending up in the hands of some Taliban groups.⁷⁵ At present, there is little direct evidence pointing to an Iranian regime having a formal policy of working with the Taliban. In the long term this would certainly not be in Iran's strategic interest. But a worsening of relations with the US and the international community on other issues—most likely over sanctions in regard to Iranian exploitation of nuclear technology—could see, temporarily at least, an increase of Iranian weapons ending up in the hands of the Taliban and other similar proxies. But the risks of miscalculation for Iran would be significant.

Refugees

During the course of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Afghan civil war, Iran played an unwilling host to perhaps as many as two million Afghan refugees. This has strained Iranian financial, social and welfare resources. In January 2010, the UNHCR noted, with some sympathy:

Iran, which is facing its own economic difficulties amid the global downturn, has hosted two generations of Afghan refugees but has received little international support.⁷⁶

Many refugees have voluntarily returned, although, more recently, growing Afghan concerns at the worsening security situation has seen a slowing down of voluntary repatriation. In 2009, the official figure of Afghan refugees in Iran was still as high as one million—with reports that unregistered refugees might even double that figure—and Iranian patience is wearing out. Threats of forced repatriation have, in the last nine years, been used as a means of putting political pressure on the Karzai government and remains a source of friction between the two countries.⁷⁷

Narcotics

A significant problem emanating from across the Afghan border is the narco-trafficking that developed during the 1990s as a means of financing the military activities of more or less all the participants in the civil war. Drug addiction is becoming a major problem in Iran's cities and heavily armed trafficking convoys inflict many casualties on Iranian security forces (including helicopters shot down) when they punch their way by force across the border from Afghanistan and into Iran.

The recent boom in Afghan opium production, propelled by a resurgent Taliban, has had an

⁷⁵ Gordon, M., 'U.S. Says Iranian Arms Seized in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 18 Apr. 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/18/world/middleeast/18military.html>

⁷⁶ 'UN agency seeks \$18 million to assist Afghan refugees in Iran', *UN News Centre*, 1 June 2010, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=34870&Cr=Afghan&Cr1=>

⁷⁷ 'Iran Said To Resume Deportation Of Afghan Refugees', *Radio Free Europe*, 15 Jan. 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Iran_Said_To_Resume_Deportation_Of_Afghan_Refugees/1370585.html

increasing impact on Iranians—both young and old—across the border. Iran has an estimated 3 million drug users... The rise in drug use and smuggling has strained Iran's police forces and prisons, as well as its economy, and aggravated rifts along the population's main fault lines... Drug abuse in Iran often gets overshadowed by other issues—namely Tehran's nuclear program—but experts say, if left unchecked, it may leave Iran with large social, demographic, and health problems for generations.⁷⁸

Iran has long called for the international community to address this in a more focused and committed way. It has also been critical of the international effort inside Afghanistan, which it sees as inadequate. In early 2010, at a counter narcotics conference in Tehran, Iran, citing 'indisputable information', even accusing members of the international community in Afghanistan of supporting the illegal narcotics trade.⁷⁹

Economic interests

Iran's desire for a stable Afghanistan is genuine and its efforts tangible. The development of Western Afghanistan, its road (and hopefully rail) networks, energy resources and markets is a key aspect of Iran's involvement in Afghanistan. Although in recent years Iran has proved itself capable of forcibly repatriating Afghan refugees, it appears to understand the value of creating attractive conditions in Western Afghanistan to make Afghans want to return voluntarily. Other projects—health care centres and mosques—also form part of the Iranian reconstruction and development packages in Afghanistan. Estimates regarding the financial scale of Iranian humanitarian aid and investment since 2001 usually range from between \$350 – 500 million, making it a key and significant contributor.

The Taliban

However, Iran's constructive approach to Afghanistan, notwithstanding, its position on the Taliban highlights the kind of controversial balancing act that it may be engaged in. Iran remains fundamentally opposed to the Taliban and any possible long-term return of Taliban rule in any part of Afghanistan. Iran is uneasy about proposed negotiations with the Taliban, which it describes as 'appeasement', and is resistant to any suggestion that there can be 'good' Taliban, with whom a deal could be struck.⁸⁰ A return of a Pakistan and Saudi-sponsored Sunni Taliban would be a disaster for Iran and might cause to shift its approach from soft power to more aggressive measures.

Iran remains deeply opposed to a strong US and international military presence in Afghanistan. The regime's most recent public announcements, made at the July Kabul conference, continued to call for the withdrawal of international forces to an agreed

⁷⁸ Beehner, L., 'Afghanistan's Role in Iran's Drug Problem', Council on Foreign Relations Background, 14 Sep. 2006, http://www.cfr.org/publication/11457/afghanistans_role_in_irans_drug_problem.html

⁷⁹ 'Iran says US, UK, Canada assist Afghan drug trade', *Press TV*, 14 Jan. 2010, <http://www.presstv.com/detail.aspx?id=116144&ionid=351020101>

⁸⁰ Saghafi-Ameri, N., 'The Taliban reincarnated', *Center for Strategic Research: Strategic Report*, May 2009, <http://www.csr.ir/departments.aspx?lng=en&abtId=06&&depId=74&semId=1761>

timetable and a 'regional approach' that puts Afghanistan's neighbours at the forefront of helping to solve Afghanistan's problems.⁸¹ The Iranian regime is almost certainly drawing satisfaction from the military difficulties—and increasing casualties—being suffered by the US-led ISAF forces. Since perhaps 2007, reports have suggested that Iranian weapons are falling into the hands of the Taliban, including sophisticated IED technology. Such claims have come from public statements that include the British government and American military commanders.⁸² The Iranian regime may not have a coherent policy on this—various government departments, agencies and intelligence groups may be acting independently of each other and without the full knowledge and consent of the regime itself. Iran's long-term opposition to the Taliban is perhaps unquestionable. But short-term, low-level support to particular Taliban, or pro-Taliban Pushtun groups, may be a useful—if high risk—foreign policy tool for sending messages to the international community.

Prospects and impact

Iran has been consistently critical of the presence of the US-led military coalition and its performance. But, in pressing for the withdrawal of these forces, Iran should be careful what it wishes for. Although clearly not Western intent, the withdrawal of ISAF troops—even if carefully calibrated—may create power vacuums within Afghanistan where the Afghan government is still not sufficiently strong to be able to control all of its territories. The Taliban are certainly becoming emboldened and more capable as they move closer to July 2011 and the perceived commencement of international disengagement from Afghanistan. The ISAF military operations in 2010 do not look to have inflicted the much hoped for reverses on the Taliban that would bring them to the negotiating table on terms other than their own.

Iran has proved much needed support and assistance to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. President Karzai and the Afghan people are right to be grateful. But Iran's activities—in Western Afghanistan in particular—are not entirely selfless. Iran still appears to be devoting more time towards criticising international performance in Afghanistan on security and counter-narcotics than taking the lead in the 'regional approach' that it seems to be pushing for. This may be a function of other pressures being placed upon it by the international community in relation to sanctions over Iran's nuclear research programme.

Iran's record for attending international conferences intended to help support stability and development in Afghanistan is mixed. Iran may well feel that such conferences do not achieve much of tangible value in the face of increasing difficulties in Afghanistan. It would be at least partly justified in this. But its 'five point plan', formally presented at the recent Kabul, looks weak, lacking in detail and credible solutions.⁸³

If Iran fails to get positive resolutions on other non-Afghanistan related strategic issues of concern, it may well choose to play out its disapproval in Afghanistan. This

⁸¹ 'Iran presents five-point plan for Afghanistan', *Tehran Times*, 21 July 2010, http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=223344

⁸² Todd, B., 'U.S. officials: Taliban fighters training in Iran', *CNN*, 23 Mar. 2010, <http://afghanistan.blogs.cnn.com/2010/03/23/u-s-officials-taliban-fighters-training-in-iran/>

⁸³ 'Iran presents five-point plan for Afghanistan', *Tehran Times*, 21 July 2010, http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=223344

might see a slackening or reversal of the aid flow or a tougher stance on refugee repatriation. At the more worrying end of the scale, it would be expected to support historic Shia and non-Shia allies in Afghanistan. It might be tempted to interference in local politics, increased intelligence gathering or support for armed groups—Pushtun and non-Pushtun—that might be able to provide a more forceful, but more malign, set of options that go beyond its use of ‘soft power’.

8. China

*Beijing's stance toward Afghanistan is rooted largely in fundamental Chinese strategic interests that extend well beyond Afghanistan itself*⁸⁴.

Michael Swaine, May 2010.

Overview

Like all Afghanistan's neighbours, China has viewed uncontrolled instability in the region with alarm and remains keenly interested in peace and stability returning to Afghanistan. China has noted with concern the increasing capability and confidence of the Taliban insurgency. China shares only a 76 kilometre long border with Afghanistan and there are no roads that go across this border. But despite this, it fears that increasing Islamic insurgent capability may spill across its borders into its already tense north-western province of Xinjiang.⁸⁵ Since the intervention of the international community in Afghanistan, China has adopted a cautious approach to its western neighbour, preferring to watch and wait.

Despite this caution, China has invested in Afghanistan. It recognises the raw material potential in Afghanistan and is keen to feed its own developing heavy industries. As a result, it has focused its efforts primarily on developing Afghanistan's raw material assets. It has avoided any significant involvement in more direct efforts to stabilise the region, for example military training, although small-scale initiatives may yet develop. This dual interest in security and investment will continue, as will China's determination to avoid getting sucked into any significant military involvement in the conflict.

Relations with Afghanistan

The relationship between China and Afghanistan has remained cordial and continues to improve with the increasing investment China is making. China condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, whilst retaining an embassy in the country, only to be forced to withdraw its staff in the 1990s as the civil war escalated. It was not until December 2001 that relations were normalised, with China recognising Hamid Karzai as the President of the new Afghan Interim Administration and reopening its embassy in February 2002. China does not have the more complex and often negative influence of other Afghan neighbours and thus President Karzai has been increasingly happy to deal with this more 'neutral' party, enabling him to assert a certain amount of foreign policy independence from the US-dominated international community endeavours in Afghanistan. In March 2010 Karzai visited Beijing to develop existing economic and co-operation agreements further.

⁸⁴ Swaine, M., 'China and the "AfPak" issue', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 31, Winter 2010, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=38880>

⁸⁵ BBC, 'Timeline: Xinjiang unrest', *BBC News*, 10 July 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8138866.stm>

Key issues

China's biggest interest in Afghanistan lies in trade and economic development.⁸⁶ As a part of a wider strategic drive towards the energy and resources of central and southern Asia, the most significant investment of all has been made by the China Metallurgical Construction Group. Since 2007 it has had a major stake in the Aynak copper mines in Logar province in eastern Afghanistan. Reports vary as to the value of this investment, from between \$3.2 billion to \$5 billion, but these copper mineral deposits (reportedly the second largest in the world) are judged crucial for sustaining Chinese economic development. Road construction in Afghanistan by Chinese companies has been a feature of Chinese engagement and rail development may also emerge in the future—a workable transport infrastructure in Afghanistan will facilitate exploiting of Afghan assets and bringing them back to China.

On security matters, China currently plays only a very small part, making a nominal contribution to the training of some Afghan security forces. But at the very least China has an interest in the physical security of Chinese personnel and assets in and around physically prominent investments such as the Aynak mine and around the country more generally. There have also been problems in the past—eleven Chinese road construction workers were killed in an attack in northern Afghanistan in 2004.⁸⁷ A similar attack against a Chinese construction company took place in 2006, but with no casualties.⁸⁸ Rocket attacks have reportedly been made against the Aynak mine. Targeted attacks and kidnappings of Chinese personnel in both Afghanistan and Pakistan may even be on the rise.

China's long-term and so-called 'all weather' relationship with Pakistan is also important. One analyst has suggested that Chinese policy drivers in the region can be defined as 'Pakistan First, All Else Follows'.⁸⁹ A China/Pakistan axis, involving co-operation on a number of levels—economic, trade, intelligence—contributes to easing the concerns of both with regard to the strategic dominance of India in the region.

Prospects and impact

Many analysts believe that China could or should be pushed to develop a more proactive role in Afghanistan, particularly in terms of military support, as the days of ISAF are now starting to look numbered.⁹⁰ However, with the potential for perhaps

⁸⁶ Farmer, B., 'China pumping millions into Afghanistan', *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 Nov. 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/6630574/China-pumping-millions-into-Afghanistan.html>

⁸⁷ Haviland, C., 'China workers die in Afghan raid', *BBC News*, 10 June 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3792901.stm>

⁸⁸ PakTribune, 'Unknown militants attack Chinese construction camp in Afghanistan', quoting *Xinhua*, 6 Dec. 2006, <http://www.paktribune.com/news/index.shtml?162239>

⁸⁹ Swaine, M., 'China and the "AfPak" issue', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 31, Winter 2010, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=38880>

⁹⁰ Shahid, S., 'Engaging regional players in Afghanistan: threats and opportunities', *CSIS Post-conflict Reconstruction Project*, Nov. 2009, <http://csis.org/publications/browse?filter0=Engaging+regional+players+in+Afghanistan+threats+and+opportunities>

even greater instability to come in the wake of this western military disengagement, the Chinese policy is likely to remain that of 'wait and see'. It will seek to minimise its risks, protecting its economic investments as necessary, expanding them where possible, and hoping for a stabilisation of the situation that will require minimal effort from China itself.

9. Russia

*There is no mistake made by the Soviet Union that was not repeated by the international community here in Afghanistan.*⁹¹

Zamir Kabulov, former Russian ambassador to Afghanistan, 2008.

Overview

As perhaps befitting its size, history and location—not to mention its status as a former superpower with aspirations to reclaim its position—Russian involvement in Afghanistan betrays a much wider and strategically-minded set of priorities. It remains happy for the US to combat the Taliban—and perhaps even exhaust itself in this task—while remaining concerned that the US may end up staying in Central Asia and Southern Asia on a more permanent basis. In the meantime Russia, like China and Central Asia as a whole, has managed to stay out of the messy entanglement of military intervention, having learnt only too painfully the lessons of its own intervention in the 1980s. Russia appears to prefer to bide its time, take some comfort from the difficulties that the NATO Alliance is experiencing and look to developing trade and economic opportunities in Afghanistan for as little effort as possible. It is also happy to maintain political leverage over the US and the other ISAF troop contributing nations through the permission it gives for ISAF non-military supplies bound for Afghanistan to traverse Russia.

Relations with Afghanistan

The post-World War II ‘Cold War’ between the NATO Alliance and the Soviet Union saw both parties competing for influence in Afghanistan throughout the 1950s and 1960s with the provision of economic assistance. Ultimately it was the Soviet Union that secured the advantage, as it began adding military assistance to the support it was providing to the Afghan government. But this was to go very badly wrong when the Soviet Union attempted naively to force a form of governance and way of life onto a country that had neither desire for it nor understanding of it. Efforts to prop up the regime led in the end to a coup in 1979 and the deployment of what was euphemistically described as the ‘Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces’ in December 1979. The disastrous Soviet military experience at the hands of tenacious and highly skilled mujahideen guerrilla fighters (many of whom went on to become what is now described as ‘Taliban’) is well documented, as is the key role played by the US and Pakistan in helping to covertly train, fund and equip these insurgents.⁹²

The Soviets quit Afghanistan in failure in 1989, but they continued to strive for influence in the country, leaving behind a puppet administration under President Najibullah, which they supported for a while and which survived until 1992. During

⁹¹ Leithead, A., ‘Is Nato repeating the USSR’s mistakes?’ *BBC News*, 15 May 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7402887.stm>

⁹² But, in particular, see Yousaf, M., and Adkin, M., *The Bear Trap*, (Leo Cooper: London, 1992), for an account of the ISI’s involvement and Coll, S., *Ghost Wars*, (The Penguin Group: London, 2005) for an analysis of the CIA’s role.

the mid-1990s the Russians backed their former Afghan mujahideen enemy, Ahmed Shah Massoud, and the somewhat fluid factions within the Northern Alliance. Becoming increasingly fearful of what they perceived as a gradual spread of Islamic fundamentalism, they provided arms and ammunition (with the tacit approval of the US) to support their protracted struggle against the Taliban.⁹³

Russia supported the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and, following the collapse of the Taliban regime provided aid and assistance to Afghanistan. President Karzai made an official visit to Moscow in early 2002 to conclude a raft of economic, energy and industrial agreements. More extensive commitments of a military and security nature are less evident, although Russia has provided intelligence support and spare parts and equipment from its own military stocks. There are no Russian combat troops in Afghanistan and neither are there likely to be in the foreseeable future. The opening of new trade routes through Central Asia are clearly in Russian interests, although Russia will remain cautious not to overreach itself in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ With the news from Afghanistan increasingly pessimistic, its profile will remain limited.

Key issues

Russia's most pressing concern in relation to Afghanistan is the flow of heroin and opiates into Russia.⁹⁵ Much of this comes through the porous northern Afghanistan border and into the Central Asia States and is the cause of reportedly 30,000 deaths a year in Russia.⁹⁶ Russia's own capabilities to address this inside Russia have proven weak and attention has increasingly focused on attempting to address this at point of source inside Afghanistan. This has entailed repeatedly calling on the international community in Afghanistan to prioritise the issue, whilst energetically criticising any perceived failing in this endeavour. However, given the rising insurgency, it has proved difficult for ISAF and the international community to retain its focus on counter narcotics activities.⁹⁷

Russia's other major desire is to see the spread of Islamic fundamentalism rolled back from its borders and those of the Central Asian States. It has already had experience of Islamic Jihadi groups operating in Chechnya and of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which opposed by violence the Karimov regime. In this respect it has welcomed the ISAF intervention that ejected al Qaeda and the Taliban and now remains in place to confront the insurgency. But again, Russia has been critical of international efforts and quick to point out the lessons it considers that it

⁹³ Coll, S., *Ghost Wars*, (The Penguin Group: London, 2005), p. 345 and pp. 464-465.

⁹⁴ Afzal, M. 'Tapping Russian market potential', *Dawn*, 9 Aug. 2010, <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/in-paper-magazine/economic-and-business/tapping-russian-market-potential-980>

⁹⁵ Stack, G., 'Russia puts anti-narcotics in Afghanistan at top of international agenda', *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, 11 June 2010, http://rbth.ru/articles/2010/06/11/russia_puts_anti-narcotics_in_afghanistan_at_top_of_international_agenda.html

⁹⁶ Yavlyansky, I., 'The silk route of the Afghan poppy', *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, (Quoting Izvestia), 9 June 2010, http://rbth.ru/articles/2010/06/09/silk_rout_afghan_poppy.html

⁹⁷ Associated Press, 'Russia criticizes U.S., NATO over Afghan drug trafficking fight', *USA Today*, 12 Mar. 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/afghanistan/2010-03-12-russia-us-nato_N.htm

learnt from its own military experience in Afghanistan are not perhaps being applied by ISAF.⁹⁸

Prospects and impact

Russia considers Central Asia to be one its traditional spheres of influence. Although it gives support to the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, this support is qualified. It remains in a position of political and economic rivalry with Europe and the United States. Its strategy in Afghanistan is to elicit the maximum effort from the international community against its own concerns of fundamentalism and narcotics. At the same time Russia intends to secure bargaining positions and political leverage for other strategic agendas beyond Afghanistan, such as its rivalry with NATO and Russian influence in the Caucasus. The supply chain that it permits across Russia—the Northern Distribution Network—is a good example of this, putting Russia in a position of ‘indispensability’ for NATO. Favours and concessions for Russia will be expected as a result—perhaps specifically, a stake in the development of Afghanistan and the region once the area has been stabilised.

⁹⁸ Leithead, A., ‘Is Nato repeating the USSR’s mistakes?’ *BBC News*, 15 May 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7402887.stm>

10. The International Community

*...we might well think that there is no real risk of Afghanistan's being left to fend for itself. The self-interest of states in the wider world should more or less guarantee an ongoing commitment. This is probably true, but the question remains whether the commitment is sufficient in its scale, character, and symbolic significance...*⁹⁹

William Maley, 2006.

Overview

Years of neglect or indifference, followed by bursts of confused attention and fragmented activity, characterised by incoherently implemented or absent strategy, have been the key themes of the international community's involvement in Afghanistan. Mixed messages and a very limited understanding of the drivers of the country and the region have also played crucial roles in hampering Afghanistan's development. In part, this is the reason for the wide range and scale of Afghanistan's problems today.

But, if the international community were to rapidly (perhaps the next two or three years) withdraw the direct political, military and financial support that it is currently providing for Afghanistan, then the country would most likely collapse. The collapse would probably (and once again) take the form of a north (non-Pushtun) against south (Pushtun) civil war. It is perhaps ironic that Afghanistan is so dependent upon the closeness of engagement that the international community currently provides, given the international community's tendency to abandon it at crucial stages in its history.

Relations with Afghanistan

The Great Game

Afghanistan has been the marching route for dozens of empires and provided the battlefields for hundreds of armies. Fierce resistance to any form of external intervention has characterised Afghan relations with the outside world although history has shown that it is relatively easy for an invading force to move in to Afghanistan, but much harder for it to get out. During the 'Great Game' period of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, the British and Russian empires vied with each other for power in the region. Britain fought three wars in Afghanistan, was ultimately unsuccessful in its efforts to assert its influence in the country and bowed out after its final conflict yielded inconclusive results in 1919.¹⁰⁰ It was to continue to fight against Pushtun tribesmen on the other side of the Durand Line for many more

⁹⁹ Maley, W., *Rescuing Afghanistan*, (C. Hurst and Co: London, 2006), pp. 132-133.

¹⁰⁰ In December 2001, at the start of the ISAF deployment, a senior British officer in Kabul hosted a dinner for senior Afghan commanders. Feeling slightly awkward, the British Officer referred, apologetically, to Britain's previous military engagements in Afghanistan. 'That's OK', came the response, 'because we beat you every time'. Anecdote told to author by senior British officer, Kabul, Apr. 2002.

years, before Indian and Pakistani independence meant that the problem ceased to be a British one.

The Cold War period

For most of the 20th century, Afghanistan has adopted a non-aligned or neutral stance, focusing more on its own internal affairs and managing to keep out of both world wars. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the region became once again of interest to two Empires, the Soviet and the American. Both superpowers attempted to gain influence in Afghanistan. The US invested heavily in irrigation and hydroelectric projects in the Helmand River valley, while the Soviets provided military hardware and political and military advisors.

Soviet influence prevailed, but experiments with communism in a rural, religious and tribal society were violently rejected. Soviet military intervention, in support of their client regime, led to a disastrous decade-long occupation that destroyed much of the society, its infrastructure and saw the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians and soldiers. The US, with Pakistan, encouraged and supported the nation-wide insurgency that ultimately caused the withdrawal of the Soviet Union. Initial optimism following the defeat of the Soviets and the puppet regime it left behind was confounded by the outbreak of internal fighting between the victorious Mujahideen groups and the emergence of the Taliban.

The 1990s – civil war

In the post-Cold War period, Afghanistan was no longer a source of interest for the international community. Ahmed Rashid notes that the US policy to the region after the fall of the Soviet Union lacked a coherent strategy. America initially flirted with the idea of supporting the Taliban, given the fact that they seemed to be the dominant force, were anti-Iranian and were at least bringing some form of law and order—however brutal—to the areas they controlled. The US certainly did not appear to object to the support given to the Taliban by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. It was not until the late 1990s, that the US began to wake up to the human rights—and women's rights—violations that were implicit in the Taliban's form of 'governance'.¹⁰¹

During this period of civil war in the 1990s, while Afghanistan's neighbours were taking sides (and generally making the conflict worse), the international community, predominantly in the shape of the United Nations and the European Union, was attempting to help the country. These bodies attempted, ultimately with little real success or impact, to administer the distribution of vital humanitarian aid and also to broker peace settlements, which would hopefully enable interim governments to take root. When the international community attempted to interact with the Taliban during this time, it became very clear that neither side understood the other's values, customs, culture and priorities. Certainly the Taliban displayed no interest whatsoever in attempting to understand the international community or even facilitating the distribution of basic humanitarian assistance. This failure of foreign parties to understand Afghan parties (and vice versa) still remains a significant block to the effective engagement of the international community in Afghanistan.

¹⁰¹ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), pp. 176-177.

2001 and beyond

The international community's involvement in Afghanistan at the start of the 21st century was of a massive scale. But it was sudden, unexpected and, therefore perhaps inevitably, rather under-planned. The arrival of the international community on such a big scale not only had a big impact on Afghanistan, but it also had a big impact on the neighbouring countries. All were forced to re-evaluate their strategies towards Afghanistan in the face of this new and very dominant force. The balance of power had been shifted. Pakistan's ambitions for a Pushtun client state on its western border were in tatters, but all the other neighbours, for all their concerns about a strong US military presence, were generally very happy to see what they believed was the end of the Taliban regime.

But following the grip the insurgency now has, Afghanistan looks to be totally dependent upon the international community for some time to come and although the international community's impact may have been positive in some areas, the sum total of their efforts still looks weak. The long-term sustainability of these mainly Western initiatives must be judged uncertain at best. The high water mark for international community efforts was probably in late 2004, when the first—and largely free and fair—Afghan Presidential elections were held.

Concerns continue to grow. With dozens of different nations engaged, all with differing strategies, plans, priorities and resources, the international effort has been characterised by:

- (a) confusion and incoherence,
- (b) assumptions, verging on arrogance, that it knows what is best for the Afghan people,
- (c) lack of understanding of the history, culture, ethnicity, customs, values of the peoples of the region,
- (d) an impatient desire for quick results,
- (e) continual demands to change plans or strategies, before old strategies have been given a chance to work.

These difficulties have been compounded by the continual rotation of diplomatic, military, government and NGO personnel, ensuring very erratic levels of experience and knowledge. The distraction of other world events—the invasion of Iraq and the global economic crisis, for example—also serve to reduce the impact of international efforts.

Key issues

For two or three years, arguably even longer, there has been increasing concern that the international community's military effort—the currently 46-nation strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—is losing the battle against a Taliban-driven insurgency that is becoming more confident and capable. Amongst a growing cost in blood and money, and with the prospect of no end in sight, nations are becoming uneasy. They are individually reviewing their commitments to the combined international effort in Afghanistan and, in essence, looking for ways of

extracting themselves as soon as possible with their credibility intact. At time of writing, the Dutch had just started to withdraw their military commitment from southern Afghanistan. The Canadians are scheduled to similarly withdraw in 2011. The United Kingdom is talking about 2014-2015 and even American commitment is now being very critically re-appraised:

The US has no enduring reason to maintain a strategic presence in Afghanistan or Central Asia. It has far more important strategic priorities in virtually every other part of the world, and inserting itself into Russia's 'near abroad', China's sphere of influence, and India's ambitions makes no real sense... The fact is, the strategic case for staying in Afghanistan is uncertain and essentially too close to call.¹⁰²

Prospects and impact

If the manner of the international community's arrival in Afghanistan in 2001 had a big impact, broadly positive, it is very possible that nature of the international community's departure will have just as big an impact, but this time largely negative. Few neighbours now appear to believe that the international community will stay to complete the task and will be starting to look at new 'coping strategies' as they contemplate the prospect of a fragile 'unfinished' state, teetering on the brink of collapse and civil war.

The international community is once again giving signals that it is keen to leave. Its professed support for dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government looks a little suspicious in this light. The prospect of a peaceful, workable and long-term power-sharing deal between the Taliban and the current weak Afghan regime does not look likely, particularly when the Taliban believe they are winning. A return to the 1990s looks a real possibility—with neighbours choosing, or forced to choose, to back Afghan warlord, military or religious clients that fit their own particular vision for Afghanistan. In this unpleasant, but increasingly likely scenario, the international community may well be relegated to well-intentioned but ineffectual efforts to distribute aid and broker cease-fires.

¹⁰² Cordesman, A., 'Realism in Afghanistan: Rethinking an Uncertain Case for the War', *CSIS*, <http://csis.org/publication/realism-afghanistan-rethinking-uncertain-case-war>

11. Northern Afghanistan

As long as the insurgency was understood as contained in a limited portion of the country, its ability to cause the existing government to implode was seen to be inevitably limited...But if the north is also perceived as being destabilised, the implications are enormous.

Antonio Giustozzi and Christopher Reuter, June 2010.

Introduction

The Nordic nations—Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland—all make an armed military contribution to ISAF. This section will give some thoughts on the current and possible future operating environments for those Nordic nations—Sweden, Norway and Finland—which are based in Northern Afghanistan. For purposes of analysis, ‘Northern Afghanistan’, will be defined as broadly covering the provinces included in the ISAF operating area known as Regional Command (North), i.e. the provinces of Faryab, Jowzjan, Sar-e Pol, Balkh, Samangan, Konduz, Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan. This area involves contingents from Sweden and Finland, with their centre of gravity in and around Balkh province, and Norway, with their centre of gravity in and round the province of Faryab.¹⁰³

A brief reminder of the Nordic nation’s military contributions in Northern Afghanistan is as follows:

1. Sweden’s prime responsibility is the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) at Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh province. Its current troop strength is approximately 500 personnel and Sweden has suffered four killed since 2005.
2. Norway’s prime responsibility is the PRT at Maimanah, in Faryab province. Its current troop strength is approximately 500 personnel and Norway has suffered nine killed since 2004.
3. Finland has a contingent of troops based in the Mazar-e Sharif PRT alongside Sweden. Its current troop strength is approximately 115 and Finland has suffered one dead, in 2007.¹⁰⁴

Denmark, with its military presence down in southern Afghanistan, will not specifically be considered.¹⁰⁵

Overview: Dynamics in northern Afghanistan

Northern Afghanistan is important for the stability and development of Afghanistan. As Ahmed Rashid clearly explained in 2001:

¹⁰³ ‘Troop numbers and contributions’, ISAF website, 4 Aug. 2010, <http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php>

¹⁰⁴ ‘Fatalities by Country’, iCasualties website, <http://www.icasualties.org/OEF/index.aspx>

¹⁰⁵ ISAF website (note 87).

Although most of Afghanistan's population is concentrated in the south and was now under Taliban control, 60 per cent of Afghanistan's agricultural resources and 80 per cent of its former industry, mineral and gas wealth are in the north. During the [19th] century, Kabul's control of the north had become the key to state building and economic development.¹⁰⁶

With the possible exception of the Hazara-dominated central highlands of Afghanistan, which have been quiet predominantly due to their extreme inaccessibility, the lack of a Pushtun ethnic presence and lack of strategic value, Northern Afghanistan is probably the most benign of the operating areas for ISAF. Furthest away from the natural Taliban environments in the south and east, Northern Afghanistan was the last area to be reached by the Taliban during the civil war of the 1990s and was never fully controlled by them. There are Pushtun pockets in the north, but the dominance of three main ethnic groups—Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara—rendered this area more or less untouchable until the rest of the country had fallen under Taliban control. It is therefore perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to state that, if Northern Afghanistan falls in the future, the rest of the country probably already has.

The north was regularly a source of clashes between the militia forces of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara groups between the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 and 2005. Such incidents have significantly subsided, due in part to disarmament initiatives (although these were never considered particularly successful) but mainly as a result of the marginalisation of key warlords. The Afghan ethnic Uzbek warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, although still able to command support from the ethnic Uzbek electorate, is mainly in self-imposed exile. The Tajik governor of Balkh province, the former warlord, Mohammed Atta has emerged as the dominant force and is still (perhaps only just) supported by central government. There were strong early incentives for the Hazara groups to stop fighting and support central government and the international community, as they had suffered very badly at the hands of the Taliban during the civil war.

The friction during this time was the result of the post-Taliban power vacuum and the efforts of all three main groups to fill it. Disputes were mainly over control of key economic assets, for example mineral and other natural assets or transport routes that could yield revenue. A key axis was the port of Hairaton, on the border with Uzbekistan and opposite the Uzbek city of Termez, and the road from Hairaton to Mazar-e Sharif. This links to the strategically important, but underdeveloped, ring road. The ring road passes through Northern Afghanistan as follows (from west to east): Maimanah-Andkhvoy-Sheberghan-Mazar-e Sharif-Aybak-Pol-e Khomri. The ring road and the feeder route up to Hairaton will remain valuable assets or targets for Taliban, warlords, traders, drug traffickers and government alike. For ISAF, the route represents a key point of entry for ISAF supplies coming into Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network.¹⁰⁷

Since the emergence of a Taliban-led insurgency, which began to develop in force from around 2003-2004, the Taliban have continually stated their intention to launch campaigns in the north and to bring it under Taliban influence. Between perhaps 2004 and 2007, these claims amounted to very little more than talk. There was very little convincing evidence that the Taliban had developed any form of power base or support in the north.

¹⁰⁶ Rashid (note 84), p. 55.

¹⁰⁷ Kuchins, A., Sanderson, T., and Gordon, D., 'The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road', *CSIS*, 17 Dec. 2009, <http://csis.org/publication/northern-distribution-network-and-modern-silk-road>

From 2007, with the growing strength, confidence and intensity of the Taliban forces, their presence has slowly started to expand into the north. It has pressed up along the ring road in the west (Herat to Maimanah) and east (Kabul, Baghlan and Konduz), pushing against and into the ‘shoulders’ of Northern Afghanistan.¹⁰⁸ The Germans in the Konduz region have suffered increasing difficulties at the hands of insurgent attacks, but the Norwegian contingent in Faryab has also been under growing pressure since 2007-2008.¹⁰⁹ The Norwegian situation has received considerably less attention than the German experience in Konduz, but it is no less significant when considering the Taliban’s advancement along the ring road towards the north.¹¹⁰ Now, Taliban activity appears more coherent and intelligent: recruitment amongst non-Pushtun groups, assistance in resolving local grievances and greater direction from the Taliban leadership inside Pakistan, including the sending of experienced personnel from the south to the north. This all reflects a growing and more effective Taliban commitment to undermining government control in Northern Afghanistan.¹¹¹

Prospects for Northern Afghanistan

There are many constructive ways in which neighbouring countries can contribute to a positive future for the people of Afghanistan. It is generally in the interests of neighbours to have stability on their borders and the prospects of enhanced trade and other economic and political exchanges with other countries. However, the paper has also shown how neighbours often have widely differing interpretations of what might be best for Afghanistan and appear rarely able to avoid interfering. The intention of this section of the paper is to examine what might characterise a negative direction for Northern Afghanistan and what role the neighbours might play.

Although Northern Afghanistan is currently still stable—and certainly the ISAF military presence remains broadly popular—the growing difficulties the country as a whole is facing, in particular the increasingly confident and capable insurgency, look more and more evident in the north. With Afghanistan’s prospects looking increasingly less encouraging each year, neighbouring countries, already worried, are now contemplating the prospect of a retreat of the international community. What looks likely to compound this is the real possibility that the Afghan central

¹⁰⁸ Ibrahim, S., ‘The Taliban’s northern front’, *IWPR*, 23 Nov. 2007, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=51875>

¹⁰⁹ Author’s discussions, Faryab province, 2008. The author spent two weeks with the Norwegian PRT in the summer of 2008 and had subsequent detailed discussions with members of the Norwegian military in late 2009 who confirmed that since 2008, more Taliban activity—and of a more organised and confident nature—was consistently being reported since that time. Five of the nine deaths reported amongst Norwegian troops have occurred in 2010 alone.

¹¹⁰ See also DuPee, M., ‘Badghis Province: examining the Taliban’s north-western campaign’, *The Culture and Conflict Review*, vol. 2, no. 5, Dec. 2008, <http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/WebJournal/Article.aspx?ArticleID=23&IssueID=19>

¹¹¹ Giustozzi, A., and Reuter, C., ‘The Northern Front: The Afghan insurgency spreading beyond the Pashtuns’, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, AAN Briefing Paper 03/2010, 24 June 2010, <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=848>

administration and security forces left behind may not be capable of withstanding the numerous internal tensions and difficulties for very long.

At present, therefore, the likely future role of neighbours—positive or negative—in Northern Afghanistan looks to depend on three key issues:

- 1) The extent to which the Taliban make progress in the country generally (and the north particularly).
- 2) The extent to which the international military presence withdraws from Afghanistan over the next few years
- 3) The competence of the Afghan government that is left behind.

If there are significant improvements in any or all of these factors, neighbours will be more inclined to stick with policies of passive inactivity or self-interested economic and trade investment. These would at least allow Afghanistan some breathing space in which to develop. But, with a worsening of the security situation and a lessening of international involvement, the neighbouring countries demonstrate little evidence of the skills, resources or desire necessary to intervene positively and proactively in Afghanistan's situation.

In fact, the majority of the neighbours played various supporting roles for different factions during the Afghan civil war up until 2001. In the event of a return to a similar fragmentation of Afghanistan in the future, the potential for neighbours to resume such activities, be it provision of intelligence reporting, weapons and ammunition, finance, political lobbying or safe haven, will be great. Such unhelpful interference, if it begins again, will serve either to speed the process of decline or provide proof that the situation has already deteriorated too far.

What might a deteriorating situation look like?

It is instructive to look at the developments of the civil war in Northern Afghanistan in the latter part of the 1990s for an indication of the way developments might unfold in the event of worsening instability in Afghanistan in the next two to five years.¹¹² The general patterns and trends of the security situation and the actions of neighbouring countries during this period offer much food for thought when contemplating the future.

The 1990s as a template for the future?

In the 1990s, the Taliban moved slowly up both sides of the ring road. From a starting point of Kandahar they moved north-west towards Herat and north-east to Kabul. Northern Afghanistan was the last area to attract the attention of the Taliban. In this region there were only limited Pushtun groupings and there was strong resistance to the Taliban from well-organised militia forces. One of the strongest resisters of the Taliban, was Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek militia commander who, with the backing of numerous sponsors had virtually turned Northern

¹¹² In particular, see Rashid (note 84), pp 55-66.

Afghanistan into an independent state, with its own currency and airline.¹¹³ In the north, therefore, the Taliban were forced to come to understandings with non-Pushtun commanders in order to make headway. But once it became clear that the Taliban were becoming the dominant force in Afghanistan, opportunistic allegiance shifts caused a superficially strong anti-Taliban front to unravel.

Neighbour reactions

As the Taliban made advances into Northern Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Central Asian States, together with Iran, Russia and India increased the provision of funding and weapons to anti-Taliban groups. On occasion borders with Afghanistan have been closed. At one point, in response to the murder of some of its diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif, Iranian military forces manoeuvred on the Afghan border and appeared close to a direct military intervention.

However, the prospect of direct military intervention from Iran, Russia and the CAS looks extremely unlikely over the next five years, regardless of the extent to which security was to deteriorate. The use of proxies will remain a more plausible solution. In the future, neighbouring countries might again ‘cherry pick’ the leaderships of the militia, religious and political groups that were closest to their own agendas. These commanders will be the recipients of covert aid. Any remonstrations from an increasingly disengaging and ineffectual international community could probably be deflected or even ignored.

There are pitfalls in assuming that the late 1990s will be an exact blueprint for Northern Afghanistan’s future. The north might not deteriorate quite so quickly this time—US air power, special forces and intelligence assets would still provide some form of deterrent even after the bulk of international forces had gone. The Taliban should have learnt several lessons from the reverses they suffered in 1997 and may be more willing to set up power-sharing deals and empower local political groupings than in other parts of the country, such as the south and east, where they have more organic support.

Fluid instability

Given the weaknesses of the Afghan army and police force, the concept of arming groups of local fighters remains attractive to the Afghan government and the international community. It has been seen periodically as a plausible solution to a worsening security situation and the desire for culturally sensitive ‘bottom up’ solutions appropriate to the region. But messages and policies have been mixed and confused and such groups would most likely be difficult to control.

But stability might then come to depend more upon a patchwork of recently hired militias and groups of fighters previously associated with the Northern Alliance anti-Taliban coalition. Although currently ‘off the radar’, networks of former fighters—particularly those associated with Dostum’s Jonbesh-e Milli movement and the Tajik Jamiat-e Islami under Rabbani—might be quickly capable of re-arming.

¹¹³ According to Rashid (note 84), p. 56, Dostum had ‘been on every country’s payroll receiving funds from Russia, Uzbekistan, Iran, Pakistan and lately Turkey. In 1995 he managed to be on the payroll of both Iran and Pakistan, then at daggers drawn over the Taliban.’

They might then re-emerge in the event of a shift in security dynamics caused by Taliban activity or the withdrawal of ISAF forces. Such groups would have little agenda but their own survival and advancement. Their allegiances and actions—as demonstrated in the late 1990s—would be fluid and unpredictable.

Prospects and impact

Although the most likely path for Northern Afghanistan is for it to remain broadly stable—certainly for the next two to three years—much will depend upon the progress the insurgency makes and the extent to which the international community retains its military presence. The Taliban gains in Faryab and Konduz provinces give a flavour of some of the issues that Northern Afghanistan as a whole may soon have to confront. Nordic forces may find themselves being required to commit to extensive counter-insurgency operations not far from their doorstep if ISAF is to take the initiative away from the Taliban. Recent reporting suggests that German forces in Konduz may soon have to undertake a more aggressive approach towards the insurgency if control is to be returned to key districts in the north-east.¹¹⁴

The 1990s give a good lesson in the dangers that can emerge from power vacuums in Afghanistan. Shaping the perceptions and likely future activities of Afghans and neighbours is the belief that the international community is looking to extract itself, the Taliban are on the rise and that the Afghan government is still not performing as it should. Therefore, the question of ‘what next?’ is likely to increasingly dominate thinking in the region. Balkh and neighbouring provinces in the north may remain relatively benign, but the experiences of the Germans in Konduz and, increasingly, the Norwegians in Faryab, may yet be coming the way of the Swedes and Finns in Mazar-e Sharif.

There is a risk that shifts in key dynamics within Northern Afghanistan will go unnoticed until too late. If the author’s experience of Faryab province is anything to go by, only a small fraction of the individual national troop totals are available for deployment beyond of the PRT’s immediate environment and most military personnel spend all their time inside the PRT perimeters.¹¹⁵ If this is the case, then ISAF military coverage of the RC(N) area is similarly stretched. It may therefore be difficult to get the key indicators and warnings necessary to form a full picture of the shifting security dynamics in the region, be it connected with neighbours, local militias or an encroaching Taliban. If outlying districts fall under the influence of insurgents this may go unnoticed for a long period.

The immediate neighbours to the north—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—will remain concerned about spill over from Afghanistan, mainly the risks of narcotics trafficking and refugees. They are unlikely to possess the will or resources for any significant intervention of any sort if the security situation deteriorated. However, they may start to reinforce border security, for example, with additional guards and restrictions on cross-border movement

Their default reaction to a worsening situation would probably be to close their borders. This might have implications for ISAF supply routes. Iran, although more interested in the western regions of Afghanistan closest to its borders, will be monitoring the fate of the Shia Moslem communities in Northern Afghanistan. In the

¹¹⁴ Philips, M., ‘Germans plan Afghan offensive’, 11 Aug. 2010, *Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB40001424052748703435104575421273002467374.html>

¹¹⁵ Author’s field trip to Faryab province, July 2008.

event of a deteriorating situation, it will have the capability and intention to increase support of all sorts to such groups. It will not be looking at military options beyond this.

Possible consequences of malign neighbour activity for the Nordic presence in Northern Afghanistan

It is likely that neighbours and near-neighbours continue to have links to key political, military and religious players in Northern Afghanistan. Contacts will not necessarily be restricted to specific religious or ethnic groups particularly favoured by the neighbour in question. All neighbours will be keen to retain as many options for manoeuvre as possible, depending upon how the strategic situation might shift. Other activities, even in relatively benign times, might include use of intelligence gathering assets and human sources for developing their understanding of the dynamics in the region and how best to influence it.

If neighbouring countries commenced, reactivated or increased existing covert activities and interference in Northern Afghanistan, it would most likely be driven by concerns that a power vacuum was developing, or that the Taliban insurgency was making rapid progress into the north. The intention of such interventions would be to protect assets—perhaps trade and economic investments or favoured leaders and groups and to ward off Taliban advancement. Nordic forces in ISAF might start to see evidence of increased smuggling, weapons and money flows from a variety of directions. Particular ‘signature’ weapon and technology types might start to emerge.

As part of this process, regional and local warlords, political and religious figures might start to adopt higher profiles. Such key players might start touring around the north, attempting to rally support and establish alliances. They might also undertake visits to neighbouring countries as part of a process of re-establishing a support base (and possibly a safe haven) that they could rely on.

However, the most likely manifestation of growing instability on the ground would be the re-appearance of independent armed groups. They might have a variety of descriptions: militia, auxiliary police, local defence forces or even mujahideen. Some of them might have legitimate or semi-legitimate origins. This kind of activity would point to the efforts of local warlords trying to establish and assert their own military capabilities and spheres of influence. Key transit routes might see unofficial roadblocks and checkpoints start to form, as insecurity fears deepened.

As a result of these sorts of developments, an increase in security incidents would become evident. Pushtun groups suspected of harbouring Taliban insurgents might become victims of other militia groups. Power struggles between warlords would flare up as they attempted to secure territory, trafficking routes and weapons. Clashes between unofficial militias and the official government security forces—ANP and ANA—would also be a significant risk. Ultimately, ISAF forces would be at greater risk to attack from two or even three sides, the insurgency and new militia groups. ISAF might also get caught between two armed groups that were confronting each other. As insurgency grew, ISAF personnel and bases might also become the target of spontaneous or orchestrated protests and demonstrations.

Recommendations for Nordic presence

Given the difficult situation in Afghanistan and the possibility that the security situation may continue to deteriorate—even in Northern Afghanistan—there are a few recommendations it is possible to suggest.

Strategic awareness

At the strategic level, a careful study of the activities, statements and movements of key regional players must be made. This must include the developments, dynamics and political statements from neighbours and near-neighbours. Nordic diplomatic assets in the CAS and the region for example will have a better feel for political dynamics perhaps than ISAF analysts in Afghanistan and should therefore be exploited where possible.

Indicators and Warnings

But developing good early warning indicators inside Afghanistan will also remain crucial, specifically understanding the mood and dynamics in the diverse districts and amongst the different ethnic groups in the north. This might be achieved by additional ISAF patrolling, but close liaison with Afghan local government and national security forces will also contribute to the picture. Nordic groups that work alongside Afghan government forces, such as training and mentoring teams, can also play an important role in judging the morale and allegiance of national security forces. Where practicable, links should be developed or strengthened with aid agencies and NGOs on the ground. But the dilemma, as ever, will be that in a poor security situation, the temptation is to confine troops to their bases rather than risk movement across uncertain territory. In this way, therefore, the all-essential situational awareness may get lost quite early on.

Lessons already identified

The history of the civil war in the 1990s offers many valuable insights. In addition, the Germans and Norwegians are experiencing, in Faryab and Konduz, at least some of the aspects of the kind of insurgency conflict that might come to the rest of Northern Afghanistan. An understanding of the triggers and trends in these local conflicts may offer useful insights for anticipating future developments. New weapons and weapons technologies might become evident—these may point towards particular neighbour's interventions and objectives. Other ISAF forces in the south also have experience of, for example, intercepting weapons and fighters as they move into the conflict area—including from neighbouring countries. An understanding of historic groupings and personalities would be helpful—the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, for example.

12. Conclusions

*...I think leaving is the right thing to do...The shura is a waste of time...You can't force the local populace to accept you in their valley...You can't make them want to work with us...*¹¹⁶

Last US commander in the Korengal valley, April 2010.

Afghanistan's future is completely dependent upon positive and constructive approaches from its neighbouring and near neighbouring countries, but although the Afghan people are regularly described as 'cousins' or 'brothers' by their neighbours this does not prevent malign interference in internal Afghan affairs. Neighbours can be co-operative—helpful, friendly and supportive—or they can be spoilers, pursuing obstructive or destructive agendas of self-interest. Sometimes neighbours can alternate between co-operative and destructive and sometimes they can follow both paths simultaneously.

If even one quarter of the plans for developing Afghan trade, transport, government and infrastructure networks were reality, Afghanistan's future would be assured. But land-locked Afghanistan is still going to struggle, as the gap between 'hopeful potential' and 'practical reality' remains as wide as ever. Even if the insurgency were not a problem, some crucial difficulties would still remain. After more than three decades of conflict, Afghan government infrastructure and capability is extremely limited. To administer, move, direct, set targets, form strategies and allocate funds needs a coherent and functioning government system. Corruption is widespread and competent personnel few and far between, either having left Afghanistan as refugees or having been recruited as translators to service the needs of the international community. It is one thing to point at the \$4 billion invested by the Chinese or the billions of dollars of raw mineral assets in Afghanistan recently reported in the press. It is quite another to assume that it will be invested wisely or in the interests of Afghanistan—or even stay in Afghanistan at all.

But perhaps more importantly, the intentions and actions of Afghanistan's neighbours are not always as constructive as they might be. Much neighbouring activity must still be defined as 'malign interference'. Iran, and most crucially, Pakistan, look to have covert agendas that are intended to serve their own interests and at the expense of Afghanistan. And it is not merely the issue of covert agendas that are restricting the value of neighbourly interventions. Lack of capacity and resources will greatly hinder the potential of the Central Asian States to make valuable contributions for a decade or two. Furthermore, many of Afghanistan's neighbours have other significant problems to contend with. With the exception of China, arguably all of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours are at some risk of their own internal strife over the next two to five years.

A coherent regional approach then begins to look problematic. Even constructive activity—the building of railways and repairing of roads, for example—can have self-serving agendas underpinning them. Chinese plans to construct a railway are probably more about the facilitation of moving minerals out of Afghan mines and quickly into

¹¹⁶ Jaffe, G., 'U.S. retreat from Afghan valley marks recognition of blunder', *The Washington Post*, 15 Apr. 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/14/AR2010041401012.html>

China. Indian efforts to repair the Delaram to Zaranj highway may owe much to the desire to bypass the Pakistani port of Gwadar and perhaps rather less to the intention to form part of a comprehensive trade strategy. Most neighbours appear to be more interested in getting through Afghanistan to economic opportunities elsewhere.

In a recent analysis of the interests of neighbours and near-neighbours in relation to Afghanistan, the pessimistic conclusion is that there are more competing interests than converging ones, noting that:

The logic of pursuing a regional approach in Afghanistan is faultless—in principle...although [neighbouring] 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...various national actions, even when well-intentioned, generate problematic consequences that only further deepen the extant regional rivalries.¹¹⁷

Furthermore, neighbouring countries will remain unwilling to commit in a fully constructive and co-ordinated fashion because they do not yet know which way Afghanistan is going to go. A key specific in this dilemma is whether the deeply unpopular Taliban are to return to some form of governance, either by force of arms or by negotiated settlement. This dilemma is causing Afghans and neighbours alike to sit on the fence and await developments. Ironically the international community is both a victim of this inertia, as it tries to help rebuild Afghanistan, but also a key contributor, as it continues to give out unhelpful mixed signals about the likely length of its involvement in Afghanistan.

The actions of the neighbours, as Afghanistan attempts to move forward hesitantly into the 21st century, have many of the trappings of the ‘Great Game’ and much of the more recent talk of ‘Regional Approach’. This does not mean that all endeavours by the neighbours should be dismissed—much has been accomplished. However, given the very real and demonstrable risks when dealing with Afghanistan, the judgement of this paper is that the best that can be expected from neighbours and near-neighbours of all kinds are individual versions of ‘limited liability opportunism’. Neighbours will engage with a minimum of investment with the intention of maximising gains in support of their own military, political and economic agendas. If Afghanistan benefits as a result, then this a bonus for which credit can be taken, rather a deliberate policy. This unofficial—and most definitely un-stated—stance will easily span another decade, and most likely longer, until it becomes clear what sort of Afghanistan is starting to emerge. If Afghanistan is lucky it will get to a position where it will be able to learn to live with the reality of this pragmatic approach from its neighbours. Regrettably, it seems that more turbulent times await.

¹¹⁷ Tellis, A., ‘Implementing a Regional Approach to Afghanistan: Multiple Alternatives, Modest Possibilities’, *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, May 2010, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=40760>

13. Recommended for further reading and reference

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