

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Afghanistan's Neighbors and Post-Conflict Stabilization

By Gregory Gleason and Timothy A. Krambs

Successful war strategies conclude with successful peace strategies. Afghanistan's transition from armed conflict to a stable, secure, and developing society depends on its capacity to overcome a fundamental conundrum: economic development cannot take place in the absence of a secure environment; at the same time, a secure environment cannot long be sustained without progress in economic development. Overcoming this fundamental challenge will define Afghanistan's success in the years ahead. The drawdown of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) is a phased aspect of the transition to national authority and the stabilization of Afghanistan. International coalition troops are scheduled to be reduced in number at the same time as Afghan security forces assume responsibility for the country's security.

During the transitional period, Afghanistan will continue to be heavily dependent upon foreign partners. Although the relationship with Pakistan will likely continue to be troubled for the foreseeable future, Afghanistan must endeavor to build and maintain stable and secure relations with as many of its neighboring countries as possible. Afghanistan also will need continued international assistance to protect itself from foreign threats and also from insurgents acting within its borders and from abroad. Afghanistan's relations with its neighbors will continue to be a high priority. The modern world requires secure borders, but it does not require closed borders. In the 21st century, international trade, international investment, and the cross-border movement of ideas, people, goods, and services are necessary components of both economic and political development in any country. In landlocked Afghanistan, relations with neighboring countries define in many respects the interactions with the outside world as a whole.

Overcoming Afghanistan's Isolation

More than three decades of armed conflict in Afghanistan have taken a heavy toll on the country's ability to interact with the outside world. Afghanistan, at the time of the attacks launched by al Qaeda extremists on the U.S. in September 2001, was one of the least globally integrated countries in the world.

Road, rail, and air linkages were backward, small in number, and limited to connections with only a few countries. In October 2001, the first international coalition forces entered Afghanistan to deny al Qaeda sanctuary. The December 2001 Bonn conference, held under UN auspices, sketched the basic outlines of Afghanistan's new national government. In 2003, under UN mandate, ISAF forces assumed responsibility for supporting the newly established Afghan government. NATO led the effort to establish security conditions for Afghanistan's reconstruction while international organizations, multilateral donors, and private business began the process of reconstruction. During this time, the great bulk of freight movement for both military and economic purposes was conducted through Afghanistan's southern transportation routes passing through Pakistan.

Afghanistan's southern transport routes, however, were both limited in number and vulnerable to disruption by insurgents in such key narrow bottlenecks as the Khyber Pass, and were therefore inadequate for the demands of Afghanistan's reconstruction. From the earliest days of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, there has been an effort to sponsor and facilitate greater regional cooperation in Afghanistan's stabilization and reconstruction efforts. In 2005, the U.S. State Department reorganized its bureaus, establishing a Central Asia and South Asia department with the goal of linking the U.S. diplomatic and humanitarian assistance programs so as to promote better relations between Afghanistan and its northern Central Asian neighbors. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Defense undertook an effort to shift transport routes to the northern part of Afghanistan, creating new corridors for transport through the countries of Central Asia and Eurasia. The international coalition also shifted a large proportion of its freight movement from the southern routes to the northern routes. This "northern distribution network" promised to reduce the vulnerabilities of reliance on southern routes. At the same time, the northern routes offered a number of other very important advantages. For instance, NATO partners are deeply committed to promoting regional development. Increased reliance on the transportation infrastructure in these Eurasian countries offers an important commercial multiplier effect for private sector development.

The linkage of Afghanistan to its neighbors in the north and south is not

a new idea. It is a very old one. Central Asia's "Silk Road" was a conduit of trade and interaction even before the time of Marco Polo. Recent conflict and extremism has isolated and excluded Afghanistan, but the country now has real potential to once again become a transit route for commerce. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in a speech in Chennai, India, on 20 July 2011, "the 'New Silk Road' is a long-term vision of an international economic and transit network that links Central and South Asia, with Afghanistan at its heart." The emphasis on northern transportation routes creates new opportunities for greater mutual interaction with Afghanistan's northern neighbors. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan share immediate borders with Afghanistan, but the movement of economic and military supplies through the transportation infrastructure of roads, railroads, ports, and air routes also involves a number of other actors throughout Eurasia, including the Caucasus and the Russian Federation. Afghanistan's other neighboring countries, China and Iran, also possess transportation routes but these do not play a role in the northern distribution network.

U.S./ISAF Drawdown: Perspectives after the Bonn+10 Conference

Facilitating Afghanistan's reintegration into its regional neighborhood requires a shift from the military operations in the hands of the international coalition to Afghanistan's national forces. In his December 2009 address to West Point cadets, President Obama announced the U.S. plan to begin building Afghan capacity to allow for the transition of military responsibilities to Afghan authorities. President Obama announced a temporary surge in military capacity in order to promote the conditions that would be needed for the transition to Afghan military authority beginning in July 2011. In May 2010, President Obama and President Karzai agreed to update the 2005 "Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership." The strategic declaration is expected to be a mutual statement of common interests but will also define the parameters of the partnership by affirming the U.S. commitment to retain a sufficient presence as long as is necessary while also demonstrating that the U.S. "does not seek any permanent American military bases in Afghanistan or a presence that would be a threat to any of Afghanistan's neighbors."

At the Lisbon Summit in December 2010, NATO announced the drawdown in ISAF combat troop strength would take place in coordination with a transfer of lead responsibility to Afghan forces. Afghan President Hamid Karzai, speaking in Kabul on 22 March 2011, outlined the first stage of the plan for the transition to Afghan military forces. The transition continued in stages throughout 2011. A coordination meeting hosted by

Turkey took place on 2 November 2011 in Istanbul. A larger, more comprehensive diplomatic meeting, hosted by the German government, took place in Bonn on 5 November 2011. The meeting was called "Bonn +10" because it was held a decade after the Bonn meeting of 2001 that originally outlined the framework of Afghanistan's post-Taliban political development. The "Bonn+10 Conference," held in December 2011, was considered the most important international summit to date concerning Afghanistan's future. Many of the delegates who assembled in the Afghanistan-chaired conference arrived with optimistic expectations regarding the possibility of an Afghan-Taliban reconciliation that might bring an end to overt discord and pave the way for future normalization. This conference was attended by 85 national delegations and 15 international organizations. The conference focused on three main areas:

- the transfer of responsibility for security to the Afghan Government by 2014
- further international commitment to Afghanistan after the handover
- the political process, i.e. national reconciliation and the integration of former Taliban fighters

Those expecting a diplomatic breakthrough were disappointed. In the wake of an errant NATO airstrike in Pakistan's territory, Pakistani diplomats used the incident as an opportunity to remonstrate with the NATO coalition, finally withdrawing from participation in the Bonn conference literally hours before the assembly convened. Pakistan resisted entreaties from the U.S. and other countries to use the conference as an opportunity, rather than squander the chance for discussion and negotiation. Taliban Leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, addressing a large public audience in the context of his Eid-ul-Fitr (Muslim holiday) message, averred that the conference was merely "symbolic." With two key parties boycotting the conference, the potential for developing a comprehensive plan for reconciliation and normalization was diminished.

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President Karzai pleaded for international aid as he laid out his vision for Afghanistan's future as: "a stable, democratic, and prosperous country, a country that is the peaceful home of all Afghans, and that enjoys friendly, mutually rewarding relations with all its near and extended neighbors and beyond." In April 2008, President Karzai solicited continued support for his key political priorities: to strengthen the rule of law, fight corruption, and counter the illicit production, trafficking, and consumption of narcotics. To attain this goal and sustain developments in security and reconstruction, he requested \$10 billion annually during the upcoming years he called the "transformation decade." He also called for a new deadline, requesting political and military support until 2024 and financial assistance until 2030. The conference ended with the participants agreeing on

the publication of rather vague “Conference Conclusions” which established international assistance to Afghanistan following the 2014 NATO drawdown, “broadening and deepening their historic partnership ‘From Transition to the Transformation Decade of 2015-2024’,” in the areas of governance, security, the peace process, economic and social development, and regional cooperation.

Partner Strategies

Regional cooperation throughout Central Asia is important. Regional cooperation, however, is not merely a disinterested and mechanical economic process, but one that takes place within the framework of a specific set of cultural institutions. It is important to note that politics in Central Asia are heavily based upon circles of influence and the cooperative relationships that are based upon political exchange. These circles of influence cross many borders. Afghanistan itself is a mosaic of groups with strong ethnic and regional identification. Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group, followed by Tajiks as the second largest group, then Hazaras and Uzbeks, as well as a number of smaller groups including the Aimak, Baluchi, Turkomen, and Nuristani. The groups are regionalized, with the Pashtun and Baluchi predominantly in the south, the Uzbeks and the Tajiks in the north, the Hazaras in the northwest, the Turkomen in the north and the Nuristani in the east. Pashto and Dari are the two official languages of the country; Dari is spoken by at least half of the population. Links between Afghanistan and its neighboring countries to the north are primarily cultural but they can be expected to become increasingly commercial as infrastructural connections pull the countries closer together. There are particular interests that incline these states and communities toward some forms of cooperation while disinclining them toward others. The following brief overview of the Central Asian states illustrates the array of interests and objectives and gives insights into their relationships with Afghanistan.

KAZAKHSTAN. Emerging as Central Asia’s economic powerhouse, Kazakhstan’s domestically cohesive political leadership has shaped a “multi-vector” diplomatic strategy in which it attempts to play the role of a major balancing actor throughout Eurasia. Kazakhstan is a small state in terms of its 16 million population, but it is vast in terms of its geographical stature; it is the ninth largest country in the world. Kazakhstan has passed through two decades of wrenching economic reform and has emerged as one of the most economically successful post-Soviet states. Kazakhstan’s ability to maneuver diplomatically through the numerous foreign policy trials it has encountered is in large part a testimony to the ability of Kazakh diplomats to exert political leverage. Kazakh diplomats have leveraged the country’s pivotal position by persuading other states to also pursue the same objectives that Kazakhstan seeks. Kazakhstan avoids direct confrontation itself while steering others toward what it regards as beneficial counterbalancing policies. In July 2010, Kazakh President Nazarbayev announced a \$50M aid package to help educate a new generation of Afghan leaders. In June 2011, President Nazarbayev announced “it is possible that the SCO will assume responsibility for many issues in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2014.”

KYRGYZSTAN At the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan was among the most promising prospects for the emergence of post-communist democracy and market reform in the entire post-Soviet space. But after two decades of unstinting international financial support for its ambitious, pro-reform democracy and market programs, Kyrgyzstan continues to teeter on the edge of financial collapse and has survived successive convulsive changes of political power. Kyrgyzstan has complicated political relations with its neighbors over water and energy, as well as border disputes, and struggles to deal with the influence of political extremists. Kyrgyzstan’s economic conditions and political vulnerabilities have inclined the leadership toward securing foreign development and security assistance. Kyrgyz authorities often discuss the necessity of choosing between an eastern or western orientation. In practice, they tend to choose both. Russian military forces were allowed use of Kant airbase not far from Bishkek, while U.S. forces were given permission to operate at the Transit Center at Manas International Airport on the other side of Bishkek. Kyrgyzstan’s east-west formula was balanced only in the sense that it represented a dynamic tension between two continually contending influences on the Kyrgyz government. This tension continues to be the most salient feature of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy. It profoundly influences expectations regarding the Afghanistan drawdown.

TAJIKISTAN. Afghanistan’s domestic travail has been sometimes described as a war of a divided state in conflict with insurgents emanating from Pakistan’s ungoverned territories. Deep ethnic and regional fissures in Afghanistan along ethno-cultural lines among the Hazara, Tajiks, Pashtun, Uzbeks, and other peoples continue to complicate stabilization. The Afghan-Tajik populations have played an important pivotal role in Afghanistan, occupying a key position in the previous Northern Alliance. The large and influential Afghan-Tajik population in areas contiguous to the Tajik border and the Panjshir Valley may play an important role in Tajikistan’s future contribution to stabilization efforts.

TURKMENISTAN. Turkmenistan’s foreign policy posture of “positive neutrality” emphasizes the country’s national self-reliance strategy based on natural gas revenues. In theory, positive neutrality is based on autarkic commercial relations implying mutually beneficial political relations with all and conflicting political relationships with none. In practice, positive neutrality meant maintaining as much distance as possible from hegemonically-inclined countries without giving up access to western gas markets that, by virtue of the possession of the fixed pipeline system, a few states continued to control. Turkmenistan was one of the very few states to indicate an intention to diplomatically recognize the Taliban in the 1990s. It has pursued a very restrained foreign policy with respect to Afghanistan’s stabilization, extending only discreet cooperation to ISAF transportation measures.

UZBEKISTAN. In April 2008, President Karimov announced a major initiative to improve international cooperation in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. At the Bucharest NATO summit, Karimov stated that “Uzbekistan stands ready to discuss and sign with NATO the Agreement

on providing for corridor and transit through its territory to deliver the non-military cargos through the border junction Termez-Khayraton, practically the sole railway connection with Afghanistan.” Karimov’s “6+3 policy,” which refers to close cooperation between the six Afghanistan “contact states” as well as Russia, the U.S. and NATO, was a significant breakthrough in the stalled cooperative relations in the region. Karimov’s policy was motivated by his government’s desire to play a greater role in the Afghanistan reconciliation and normalization process. This also allows Uzbekistan to reposition its policies with respect to Russia, the United States, and the European Union. A large and influential Afghan-Uzbek population in areas contiguous to the Uzbek border can also be expected to affect decisions about Uzbekistan’s future contribution to stabilization efforts.

Afghanistan’s stabilization is of exceptional importance to the countries of Central Asia. As the drawdown proceeds, the Central Asian countries are likely to realize that Afghanistan’s stabilization requires greater effort in terms of partner strategies. The withdrawal of international forces is not likely to lead to an abrupt and complete halt of fighting, but rather a reconciliation of disputes carried out in such a way that the strategy integrates societal segments into a progressively more stabilizing configuration of local actors. Confrontational, frontal combat operations at some point segue into awakenings of resourceful local factions that become positive agents of stabilizing change through counterbalancing, countervailing and counterpoising.

Future Perspectives

In complex insurgency situations like those faced in Afghanistan today, the conclusion of a war strategy is not to press for a victory and unconditional surrender, nor is it to negotiate a bargain that would be a minimally ignominious withdrawal. The withdrawal of U.S. and ISAF forces in what is perceived as defeat would only lead to a Taliban resurgence and to greater peril for the Central Asian countries. It would also lend credence to the mythical impermeability of Afghanistan, dating back to the time of Alexander the Great through the British experience in the 1830s, the 1870s, and finally to the experience of the Soviets in the 1980s. It would badly damage America’s image abroad and would lead to troubles rather than to opportunities. The goal of policy should be neither to confront in provocation, nor should it shrink from challenges. The goal should be to reposition in order to take advantage of naturally occurring countervailing forces in the region. The best strategy for stabilization in Afghanistan includes measures for regional stabilization.

The United States is shifting away from its lead role in Afghanistan and is now emphasizing partnership capacity building and shared resources. The administration and Congress, facing substantial debt and budget adjustments, are reluctant to continue funding a war without an easily identifiable conclusion. Still, there remains concern, not only among Afghanistan’s neighbors and the

international community, but also within the country itself, that militant groups might push Afghanistan back to violent conflict if insufficient foreign troops remain, or if local security forces are incapable of successfully quelling insurgency. As the drawdown in ISAF force levels commenced in summer 2011, questions were raised in Afghanistan’s neighboring countries regarding the speed and scope of drawdown and the psychological effect the drawdown would have on insurgents and reconstruction “spoilers”. The imminent reduction in combat force strength underscored the importance of renewed efforts at diplomatic coordination on a regional level.

Whatever the goals established for Afghanistan’s long-term development, the speed and scale of the drawdown of ISAF combat forces has direct implications for Afghanistan’s northern neighboring and partner countries. The reduction in foreign combat forces in Afghanistan raises important questions for Afghanistan’s northern neighbors as they anticipate shifts in the political atmosphere throughout Central Asia. What is the expected speed and scope of the reduction of combat force levels? How is the reduction of coalition forces coordinated with the increase in authority of Afghanistan security forces? Will force reductions be conditioned upon political and military success even if the withdrawal of western influence is perceived by Afghanistan’s adversaries as an opportunity to exacerbate the current weakness of security forces? How do Afghanistan’s neighbors share commitments in a common strategy towards regional stabilization? What specific strategies would lead to partner cooperation among Afghanistan’s neighbors? These questions require informed and insightful responses.

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