

The Afghanistan Crisis: Regional and International Dimensions



Seminar in Madrid, 30 March 2009

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Robert Matthews and Fionnuala Ní Éigeartaigh
Seminar in Madrid, 30 March 2009

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Executive Summary

The Madrid conference on the regional dimensions of the Afghanistan-Pakistan crisis examined the possibilities and pitfalls of developing a regional approach to the mounting conflicts in these South Asian nations. A key element was assessing the formation of a contact group that, with the coordination and backing of the international community, would develop a regional diplomacy to address the deteriorating security situation in both countries.

At this juncture the seemingly endless war in Afghanistan and increasing instability in Pakistan have forced the US to review its strategy and take into account regional problems hitherto ignored. The Taliban and Al Qaeda have spread their networks across the region, and Pakistan and India are practically at war in Afghanistan. The question is whether a multi-layered regional approach will advance the goals of creating a stable Afghanistan and, in the process, ease long-standing regional tensions that hinder stability and economic development.

The US has focussed its aid to Pakistan on internal security and sent billions of dollars into Pakistani military coffers. However, the increasingly unstable political and economic situation in Pakistan has underscored the need to strengthen governance and democratisation processes. The underlying causes of the growing Talibanisation of Pakistani society can be found in the state's inability to deliver basic services and development, coupled with widespread corruption. The Pakistani army's rationale for supporting the Taliban has been to reassert their political sway in Afghanistan, and to thwart Indian influence there. Ultimately, Pakistan sees Afghanistan as an extension of its problem with India; therefore, addressing the Kashmir dispute could ease tensions between the two countries.

The international alliance in Afghanistan could adopt a more comprehensive approach embracing cross-border

regional cooperation, including much-needed investment in trade and infrastructure. However, cooperation is hindered by the political volatility of some Central Asian countries. Western public support for the intervention is faltering and European Union (EU) countries are reluctant to commit troops. Burden-sharing in the form of financial contributions should extend to the Gulf states and other stakeholders. There is a consensus that the troop surge should be matched by a 'governance surge' from Kabul, and the year 2011 is considered crucial for assessing the relative progress or deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. Expanding the Afghan security forces will also be a key issue for the North Atlantic Alliance Organisation (NATO) over the next two years. United Nations (UN) expertise on Afghanistan, including knowledge of local languages and local actors, should be more effectively tapped and might be more useful than setting up new diplomatic initiatives. Civilian casualties resulting from Western military operations remain a contentious issue as they undermine the legitimacy of international intervention and increase popular resentment.

Security, drugs and refugees are the issues that Iran wishes to address in the context of regional talks on Afghanistan. While the nuclear issue is of concern to the West, it could be dealt with separately as it is not directly relevant to Afghanistan. The Chabahar route through Iran is the most practical route for transporting NATO supplies into Afghanistan and Iran's involvement in regional talks could facilitate an agreement in this regard.

The Central Asian states are flexing their diplomatic muscle by playing different powers off each other, as evidenced by manoeuvring over the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan. However, extreme poverty has led to social breakdown in areas bordering on Afghanistan, creating an ideal breeding ground for Islamic militants. Both Russia and Iran have complex regional security concerns that hinder and protract US and NATO intervention in Afghanistan. In these cases, bilateral talks on concrete issues may prove productive in advancing a regional solution.

China has a long-term interest in the region stemming both from an economic need for resources and security problems in its Western territory. The insurgency that menaces Pakistan is detrimental to Chinese interests because it may contribute to destabilising Xinjiang Autonomous Region, where concern focuses on the separatist resistance of Uighurs and other Muslims. However, cooperation with Pakistan has shielded Chinese interests from retaliation by the Taliban for the suppression of China's Muslim population. The Chinese, like the Western coalition, want to prevent a hostile jihadi government in Afghanistan; it should therefore be possible to get constructive engagement by the Chinese in regional efforts to secure stability.

The Pakistan-India conflict in Afghanistan has a Persian Gulf correlative: the antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis fear that Iran is increasing its presence in Afghanistan and if Iran becomes involved in a regional dialogue, the Saudis will wish to take part. Pakistan also considers itself a valid interlocutor in talks between the Taliban and Kabul. Saudi Arabia could play a role in delegitimising extremism in Pakistan, given that it has close political connections with the country.

The international community is now proposing the creation of a regional contact group, consisting of Afghanistan's neighbours, to conduct multi-party diplomatic efforts. Strategic regional issues relating to

Afghanistan could be isolated and placed in 'separate baskets'. A wider contact group could include important players such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Japan. The common thread that could unite all these actors is that they are all threatened by the Taliban and Al Qaeda, to one degree or another.

There are many advantages in creating a contact group. However, the most important task is addressing Pakistan's security concerns as a precondition for gaining the military's cooperation in controlling their western border areas with Afghanistan and rethinking their past support for the Afghan Taliban. Regional dialogue might produce a more creative and flexible approach and should at least be attempted, given the failures of the alternatives in the past eight years. If the contact group goes forward, it should probably be kept small and conduct discussions away from public scrutiny.

Obstacles to the contact group include weaknesses inherent in Afghanistan's neighbouring states that are complex and fragmented; they may also compete for resources and display mutual distrust and resentment. Whatever the possibilities for success of a contact group, it may be brought up short by regional impediments and the realities of escalating US-NATO military operations in Afghanistan and airstrikes in Pakistan. These could undermine the best-intended regional dialogue on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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Acronyms

ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghanistan National Security Forces
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSTC-A	Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organisation
EEC	Eurasian Economic Community
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OMLT	Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

Introduction

The need to deepen our understanding of the potential role of regional countries in addressing the political, military and social crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan formed the rationale for this seminar. Its immediate objectives were three-fold: 1) to provide an analytical framework for understanding the current conjuncture in Afghanistan within its broader geopolitical context; 2) to explore the relevant issues surrounding the advancement of regional dialogue and to identify positive approaches to enhancing regional cooperation; and 3) to draw inferences, attempt some conclusions and offer suggestions for how international and regional actors might promote such regional involvement and diplomacy to help resolve the dual crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The context for the seminar was the intractable war in Afghanistan and the increasing instability in Pakistan, which is facing its own militant Islamist challenge and growing internal terrorism. The war in Afghanistan has gone on for thirty years, a period of time comparable to that encompassed by the beginning of World War I to the end of World War II. Despite the doubling of NATO and Afghan troops and operations in the past four years, the military situation for the Western coalition has steadily deteriorated, as has the government's legitimacy. Violence is at an eight-year high and the credibility of Hamid Karzai and the central government at a seven-year low. The situation in Afghanistan appears to be unravelling, increasing the risk of civil war and state collapse.

In Pakistan, social and political stability has also disintegrated notably; the nation is currently just behind Afghanistan in assessments of the world's failing states. Al Qaeda has entrenched itself and the Taliban have expanded their presence exponentially over the past five years. With its nuclear weapons and terrorist presence, it has been ominously dubbed 'the most dangerous country on earth'. The twin crises of Afghanistan and Pakistan have arrived at NATO's

doorstep as perhaps its greatest challenge yet. And it has become an ever-more critical issue for the US, Europe and South Asia.

The current US-NATO strategy for both countries contains military, political/governance and development components and a new emphasis on regional diplomacy. It is not aimed at a military victory over the Afghan Taliban, which nearly all observers concede is not attainable now. Rather, the strategy is designed to stabilise Afghanistan as a precondition for a broader and more comprehensive reconciliation and reintegration process with the Taliban. A carefully-crafted negotiations and conciliation process, led by Kabul and backed by the US and NATO, seems to offer possibilities to reverse the negative trend lines. Thus, the new strategy could become a prelude to drawing down the international military missions there and for an eventual exit strategy.

While this revised strategy is more complex and sophisticated than the approach of the past eight years, its centrepiece is still military: a surge, doubling the number of US soldiers, together with smaller and more temporary increments from NATO countries' armed forces. The strategy, forged in Washington, also calls for more coordinated and effective strategies along the critical Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which is the locus of much of the Taliban activity and its infiltration into Afghanistan. The intensified military push is designed to retake, secure and hold areas currently under Taliban control while providing for ongoing stabilisation, protection and development of these zones. At a minimum, it is hoped that the new military component will enhance NATO's position in any future negotiation with the insurgency.

Furthermore, the previous imbalance between military and civilian aid will be redressed and more money will be applied toward economic, political and institutional development; also, the strategy envisions shifting control of these programmes from the international community to local organisations under an effective 'Afghanisation' programme.

Finally, and providing the motivation for this seminar, the new administration in Washington and other NATO governments have underscored the value of dialogue among Afghanistan's neighbours and the formation of a 'contact group' to deal with the escalating crisis in Afghanistan. Ideally, the contact group would be kept relatively small and be under the aegis of the United Nations. However, the US will be promoting its own version of a regional and international dimension to its Afghanistan strategy in the coming months. These initiatives will likely have a better chance of success with international, and especially Pakistani, involvement and support. In fact, the ultimate goal is to bring the Pakistani military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) fully on board to dampen the fires of the insurgency in Afghanistan.

The Madrid seminar focused on placing the war in Afghanistan in a regional context, examining the role that its neighbours play in the region and assessing the possibilities and constraints on creating a regional framework for a negotiated solution to the twin crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Questions remain over how much regional cooperation is possible. Can regional diplomacy, bilateral or in a contact group, profitably engage in dialogue with Afghan and Pakistani actors, pave the way to peacebuilding and facilitate an eventual exit strategy for NATO? Will such a regional approach advance the overarching goal: the creation of a stable Afghanistan and Pakistan founded on local solutions and political compromises?

The full day seminar was jointly organised by FRIDE and the Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre (Noref). Attended by 70 participants, the seminar featured presentations by leading Pakistani, Afghan, Iranian, Saudi, Canadian and European experts drawn from academia, the media, think-tanks and government. The following is a narrative summary of the seminar's presentations and debates that took place under the Chatham House Rule. In the interest of thematic coherence, certain ideas expressed in one panel's discussion may have been placed under another panel. Most references to a regional contact group were gathered under a single heading in the final section.

Panel I: The Pakistan factor

After the Mumbai attack in 2008, Pakistan reappeared on the international radar; until then, little attention had been paid to the political reality inside Pakistan. Washington has pumped billions of dollars into the country since 2001, mainly to support the military as the custodian of security and stability in Pakistan. Scarce attention, however, was paid to the longer-term political consequences of this strategy. The international and domestic focus on Pakistan's security has proved detrimental to the broader issues of democratisation and governance.

The spread of the Taliban

President Pervez Musharraf's endorsement of the US-led global war on terror was met with growing resentment within Pakistani society and became an ideal rallying cry for extremist positions. Tacit and, in some cases, active state support for extremist groups, coupled with the 'Islamisation' of education and social issues, helped entrench Muslim extremists. Religious radicalisation of society has now broken out of traditional areas such as the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Kashmir and is affecting the entire country. Furthermore, the state's inability to deliver basic services and development, Pakistan's 'democratic deficit' and widespread corruption have added to the appeal of these groups.

The growth of religious conservatism, therefore, can be interpreted as society's response to the disappointing performance of the state, both in terms of its effectiveness and its perceived legitimacy. Attempts to devolve power to the local level have apparently strengthened local strongmen, particularly in the more marginalised areas where the Taliban hold greater sway. As a result, control of these areas by the central government seems to have been consolidated at the expense of provincial assemblies whose role it is to

maintain some degree of oversight. Even in Baluchistan, not traditionally noted for its religious fanaticism, the huge Pakistani military presence has created discontent and frustration, and the Taliban project is seen by many as an attractive alternative to poor or non-existent public services.

The accommodation of the Taliban by the Pakistani military is a critical problem, allowing recruitment drives, accumulation of provisions and the building of support networks. Thus, claims by the Pakistani military to be earnestly engaging the insurgency cannot be taken at face value. No insurgency can be defeated as long as insurgents have a safe haven. This lesson appears to have been ignored by the international community over the last eight years, leading to the present dire situation. Taliban coercive tactics were left unchallenged and, as a result, alternative local power structures have been eliminated. In the Swat valley, Maulana Fazlullah set up an FM radio station and broadcast inflammatory threats both to local people and the Pakistani state, but the Musharraf government never shut his station down nor attempted to jam the transmissions. Partly as a result, nearly 60 per cent of mullahs in the frontier areas, who were power-holders in that region, have been assassinated over the last few years, leaving the area open to Taliban rule.

When the North West Frontier provincial government signed a deal with the Taliban movement in the Swat valley in February 2009, allowing the Taliban to impose strict Sharia law in Swat's courts, observers warned that the accord was a major capitulation contradicting constitutional law. The Taliban interpretation of Sharia is overtly punitive, allowing for floggings and the destruction of people's homes and girls' schools. The Taliban soon took control of local administration, police and schools, dominating the administration of Swat. This process then spread to other areas, as seen in the Taliban advance on Buner and Dir in April. Having won Swat, the Taliban made clear their ultimate intention to overthrow the national government.

By summer 2009, the Pakistani army claimed success in retaking the Swat valley from the Taliban, in the

wake of the military offensive which displaced over two million people. However, there are indications that the Taliban abandoned the area without a major fight, possibly with the intention of returning when the military withdraws at a future date, or to fight elsewhere. The army has not provided solid evidence that it has killed or captured Taliban leaders, and military control is limited to urban centres and roads. Early popular support for the military campaign is waning as the fighting drags on and people remain in cramped tent camps. The population also distrusts the army's promises to rebuild towns, given its track record in other regions such as Bajaur where towns remain in ruins eight months after they were destroyed by the army who routed the Taliban.

The underlying dilemma is the urgent need to provide services – judicial, police, health care and schools – in a timely manner. Failure to deliver will leave the area vulnerable to being retaken by the Taliban. The civilian government in Swat at this point does not have the money or capacity to rebuild, and the government's plans to provide services appear to be creating antagonism and suspicion between the military and civilian government. The burning question is whether the authorities have the will and capacity to secure Swat and prevent the Taliban from reasserting control. Military analysts fear that Swat will remain under continued threat from Islamic extremism for some time.

The state and the Taliban

Pakistan has capitalised on the inflow of military and other assistance from the US since 11 September 2001 (9/11) and in fact, may be keeping the issue alive to maximise the country's benefits as a strategic partner in an anti-terrorist war. Furthermore, the lion's share of the military aid went to weaponry for a conventional war with India. The high level of assistance to Pakistan may also have prevented the US from establishing an all-out partnership with India.

Pakistan sees Afghanistan as an extension of its problem with India and the army rationalises its

support for the Taliban as a means to thwart Indian influence in Afghanistan and regain the political sway it had there in the 1990s. In recent years, New Delhi has made a heavy investment in development and construction in Afghanistan and established a significant consular presence in the country, especially along the western Pakistan border, a matter of serious concern to Islamabad. Afghanistan, for its part, has historically maintained links with India to counterbalance the influence of its two near neighbours, Pakistan and Iran. During the seven years of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, Indian influence was negligible and the Taliban were practically controlled by Pakistani authorities. In turn, Kabul did not raise sensitive issues with Islamabad, like the Durand Line, which Afghanistan does not accept.

After 9/11, the strategic U-turn expected of the Pakistanis never happened. Perceived as an indispensable NATO and US ally, with a quasi-monopoly over supply routes into land-locked Afghanistan, Pakistan has played a double game of appearing to fight terrorism, while protecting the Taliban. Elements within the military and the ISI continue to work with the Taliban and thus contribute to their expansion, despite Taliban links to Al Qaeda. In addition to direct concerns over Indian influence to its west, Pakistan continues to support the ousted Taliban because of its distrust of the Northern Alliance-dominated government of Hamid Karzai. This policy serves as insurance against the withdrawal of the US and NATO, and positions Pakistan as a future partner in Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda's strategic aim is to acquire territories and resources to build bases in Pakistan, preferably inland, far from US drone attacks, and eventually in Afghanistan. Abetting that aim are Pakistani army ceasefires with local militants and the diversion of its attention to the eastern border with India. The real consolidation of Al Qaeda and the Taliban took place in 2002 when Pakistan's entire army was arrayed against the Indian army. Then in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai attack, a large percentage of Pakistani

troops was diverted from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North West Frontier Province to the Indian border, essentially leaving the tribal areas in the hands of the Taliban. Pakistan's army is still ill-prepared to face militancy and has consistently refused US offers of training in counterinsurgency, alleging that the army's main purpose is to confront India in a conventional war setting from its eastern border.

On the other hand, the Pakistani government appears amenable to the idea of brokering a negotiation process between Kabul and the Taliban although, for the time being, the Saudi back-channel dialogue with the Taliban has scotched this possibility. The ISI and the Pakistani military wish to be the major interlocutors in any dialogue between the Taliban and either the US or the Karzai government.

There are significant differences between the negotiation processes with the Taliban in Afghanistan and those in Pakistan. Karzai has brought over some 6,000 Taliban and several leading commanders. While the Afghans have not recognised the Afghan constitution or Afghan rule of law, neither have the ex-Taliban commanders, who have been named regional governors, allowed to impose Sharia law. In Pakistan, however, the pattern of making sweeping concessions to militants in the west has only hardened their militancy and emboldened them to expand.

In tackling the Taliban in Pakistan, neither a purely military nor a purely political solution is considered feasible. But, if the West and the Afghan government have any chance of success, winning the loyalty of the population is crucial. The same counterinsurgency formula needs to be applied in Pakistan as is now being showcased in Afghanistan: recovering territory that has been lost and securing it for the civilian population so that development can be implemented. It is therefore essential that the Pakistani army now offer a strategic *volte-face* regarding the Taliban and for NATO to establish markers for the military to demonstrate that it has abandoned support for these militants in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Civil society and the governance crisis

Pakistani society is suffering from an acute loss of governance and the situation has deteriorated significantly in recent times. The absence of effective government and institutional presence, military losses, a weak economy and increasing poverty have all contributed to the kind of discontent that leads to extremism. The struggle for power among the elites is leaving a huge window of opportunity for religious militants to appeal to all those alienated and marginalised members of the society. Pakistani President Zardari is seen as weak and unpopular and the fear now is that if the Taliban continue infecting other areas of the country, Washington may decide that a military ruler would be more effective, as it did under Bush.

Within Pakistan, two conflicting and competing ideas exist as to what the nation-state of Pakistan should be: the military's national security idiom, which focuses on military-led nationalism and repelling India; and the civilian paradigm, which has always featured democracy, trade, investment and economic development. This structural contradiction underlies the chronic sense of insecurity that the Pakistani establishment and people feel.

Pakistan, in theory, has all the institutions needed for a fully operative democracy. However, the institutions are largely formalistic façades. Although there is a functioning parliament, the populace routinely questions the way the legislature conducts itself and the level of engagement of its members. Informal dynamics and processes are decisive in the way society operates and need to be acknowledged and analysed in order to address Pakistan's political shortcomings.

An articulate and increasingly influential civil society has emerged today in Pakistan and has become one of the major interlocutors for reform, as witnessed by the lawyers' movement. Space for these progressive agents of change needs to be created and supported by the international community in spite of possible short-term

destabilising effects. In fact, a strengthened civilian government could serve as an interlocutor with the military and become the most effective way to combat the Taliban and international terrorists operating in Pakistan, Afghanistan and across the region. Tackling development in Pakistan involves reforming the political system and loosening the military's tight control of political processes. An influential civil society could also contribute to settling issues with India and Afghanistan. The international community's sustained commitment to civil society and political parties is essential, including economic and political support. The European Union and European governments should match US assistance for development and political reform but, above all, they need to commit for the long term.

The most important lesson is that the international community must coordinate its strategy regarding Pakistan as it now recognises it must do in Afghanistan. It is essential to develop a better understanding of Pakistan's political context, including differentiating among the militant groups and addressing the governance challenges facing Pakistan. The European Parliament is currently planning to undertake capacity-building programmes with the Pakistan Parliament; this type of initiative should be taken up by other players in the international community.

US strategy and Pakistan

Obama's current strategy, while still heavily centred on a military 'surge', aims to strike a balance between military support and development aid. But it remains to be seen whether this broad approach, designed to enhance security and stability in the country, will become a successful strategy in gaining domestic acceptance of the military role of the US and NATO in the country.

The US must realise that its approach to Pakistan so far has not resulted in stabilising the country for a number of reasons. First, unilateral drone missile attacks on Pakistani territory since 2008 have often

not distinguished between tribal and terrorist groups and have resulted in many civilian casualties. Second, some \$11 billion used primarily to support the Pakistani military have been diverted to prepare for war with India rather than to confront its own militants. Third, Washington's security-centred approach is perceived as contradicting the declared objective of promoting democracy, alienating many Pakistanis from US goals in the region. Fourth, between 2005 and 2007, economic aid was largely concentrated in budget support which, given the endemic corruption in Pakistan, rarely reached its targeted population and has been questioned by the international community. Finally, other strategic moves in the region, such as the nuclear deal with India, approved by the US Congress in October 2008, have heightened Pakistan's fears of India's regional hegemony and increased the risk of triggering retaliatory deals between Pakistan and China.

Western policy towards Pakistan is inconsistent and tends to be a single-issue policy (anti-terrorism), leaving too much leverage for the Pakistani establishment to pursue its own interests. Ultimately, this leaves the West with little influence in the development of strategic thinking or decision-making in Islamabad.

Participants summarised a number of concrete measures regarding Pakistan, which would improve the situation in both Afghanistan and Pakistan: 1) Pakistan's near-monopoly over NATO supply routes must be weakened; 2) international coordination on Pakistan should be tightened; 3) measures to establish civilian control over the military should be promoted; 4) military assistance to the security apparatus should be more transparent; 5) strengthening Pakistani control over FATA is crucial as the situation is becoming increasingly difficult to contain; and 6) efforts should be made to resolve tensions between India and Pakistan which would benefit the stability of the region, and specifically in Afghanistan. US President Obama's strategic review unfortunately does not yet reflect this more comprehensive agenda.

Panel II: NATO, the UN and the international alliance in Afghanistan: Coordinated or conflicted agendas?

Western governments have provided many rationales for going to war in Afghanistan: the global war on terrorism, a war against medieval traditions in poor Muslim countries that need modernity and development, and a war against corruption, poor governance and inefficient public administration. However, it is not feasible to rally support for all these goals or, certainly, to accomplish these objectives. It is crucial to establish priorities and this means defining benchmarks and timeframes, and the criteria by which such benchmarks are measured. However, the war in Afghanistan is too often viewed in the Muslim world as a war against Islam, giving rise to resentment and the protraction of the war. Finally, the issue of how the war is solved must be approached carefully and an exit strategy for the US, Europe and NATO must be designed with ample consideration of the regional ramifications.

Since he was elected, President Obama has reiterated his support for multilateralism in foreign affairs, a departure from the previous administration's much-resented 'go-it-alone' approach. Thus, there is more space for the international community and its chief organisations to foster and broker a regional dialogue over Afghanistan. Burden-sharing now involves considerable financial contributions; it extends not only to NATO and the Western countries but also to the Gulf states and those countries in the region that can provide funding, particularly in the security sector. A significant form of burden-sharing would involve

supporting and enlarging the Afghan police force – which will be a key issue over the next two years. The extension of financial burden-sharing to regional dialogue would be a logical step.

How long Western public support can be sustained is a fundamental question surrounding the entire Afghan military operation. Most European governments are aware that the Afghan mission has become deeply unpopular with their populations. EU governments are trying to portray the mission as civilian, with no possible military solution, leaving them open to the charge that this is a pretext for refusing to commit more troops. Western governments need to lower their expectations, increase resources, become more pragmatic and, above all, be candid with their citizens.

The year 2011 was cited as crucial for assessing the relative progress or deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. If there are no signs of improvement by then, it will be very difficult for the US to sustain the mission and, if they leave, other Western countries will follow.

The international community might also take an important step and embrace a comprehensive regional approach, as is already the case with EU development projects in Central Asia. Investment in trade and infrastructure is desperately needed in Afghanistan, along with creative solutions that could link together different countries in the region. Initiatives could include transnational economic development projects with, for example, Germans and Norwegians operating in the north, and Spain and Italy in the west, where their respective country missions are located. However, such cooperation is hindered by the political volatility of Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan. Bilateral or multilateral alliances in the region are constantly shifting, making long-term commitments difficult. In the end, it is not at all certain that a comprehensive approach could overcome the widespread and intensifying insecurity in Afghanistan, which must first be dealt with if there is to be any chance of implementing governance and development initiatives.

Regional diplomacy, backed by the international community, might also advance the reconciliation process. President Obama specifically mentioned the need for a reconciliation process in every province. However, there are misgivings about reconciliation, particularly in the short term. First, the Taliban are not going to negotiate in earnest if they consider they are winning. Second, the current increased military emphasis complicates negotiations. A continued reliance on air strikes, stemming from past troop shortages and a fear of casualties by Western politicians, has already undermined the credibility of NATO and is a propaganda bonanza for the Taliban.

International intervention (NATO, UN or EU) can strengthen or align with existing regional axes: India-Iran-Russia is one example and Pakistan-China is another. The Iranian-Russian relationship is extremely important, but the limits to Russia's influence raise doubts over Russia's problem-solving role in the region and whether it is being overstated. Russia and Iran do not necessarily want the Taliban to win, because drug trafficking and heightened insecurity in Afghanistan or Central Asia undermine their security interests; yet, at the same time, they are wary of the West succeeding. Their inconsistent approaches in Afghanistan hinder and protract US and NATO intervention.

International coordination

NATO, the United Nations and the European Union are the three main international institutions with a potential role to play in generating a regional response to the twin crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet, all three are plagued with organisational problems and often ineffectual approaches to their missions in Afghanistan. In addition, a lack of coordination among the numerous international institutions in the country has led to considerable overlap and a level of dysfunction, exacerbated by a diverse mix of bureaucratic, institutional and diplomatic agendas. Indeed, the Western effort in Afghanistan has been characterised as a 'coalition of the unwilling, the lukewarm and sometimes even the incompetent'. Coordination problems may lessen now that the Obama

administration has shifted from unilateralism to strategic, consensus-building leadership. Unifying Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and NATO commands could boost effectiveness, particularly from the point of view of increased accountability for those who have concerns about the OEF operation. Convergence among the UN, NATO and OEF should also be clearly defined, aiming at greater coordination on the ground.

Up until now, the nation with a military command in a particular province was considered the lead nation in that province. If the proposal of rotating regional commanders is implemented, the association of one country with one province will be discarded. However, there will still be one lead nation overall and, if the US assumes overall military command, a natural unification will follow. Lack of coordination among Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) is also a major problem; they report back to their home countries rather than integrating their activities. There are also cleavages among provinces where PRTs work well, others where results are marginal, and those not having a PRT. European countries thus need to accept a clear chain of command, organised by the United States.

US military predominance, however, does not obviate the need for coalition political control, particularly regarding troubling operations such as air strikes and ground attacks on villages, with their inevitable civilian casualties. It is indisputable that civilian deaths undermine the legitimacy of international intervention and increase popular resentment. While political control is essentially determined on the basis of troop commitments, EU countries should influence US policy regarding its reliance on air strikes and its controversial cross-border drone attacks in Pakistan, which have also caused disproportionate harm to civilians. The issue of civilian casualties needs to be tackled seriously. In 2008, while 58 per cent of civilian casualties were caused by the Taliban, 42 per cent resulted from the Afghan army and coalition operations. Of that 42 per cent, two thirds were the result of air strikes, leaving a third of these

unnecessary deaths caused by the conduct of ground operations.

NATO

Fighting its first military mission on the ground and its first mission out of area (Europe), NATO divides its effort between headquarters and operations on the ground, resulting in a problem of diverse mandates. NATO's logistical responsibilities include organising strategic airlifts from areas adjacent to Afghanistan. In the future, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan could be utilised to provide airlifts. Relatively stable politically, the governments of these countries are more dependable to work with than Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In the first years of the Afghan operation, the military component was ascendant, but the pendulum has swung back and, increasingly, countries and institutions are talking about a more comprehensive military and state-building approach. Moreover, while regional security is paramount, an exclusively military – as well as an exclusively political – strategy is recognised as a chimera. Afghans must feel that NATO forces are a reliable partner, committed for the long term and placed in the service of a political solution. There is consensus that the troop surge needs to be more coordinated than previous US and NATO military efforts and should be matched by a 'governance surge' from Kabul.

It is not clear whether NATO has the legitimacy or mandate as a military alliance to engage in regional dialogue and cooperation. Although as an alliance NATO is not expected to be a regional peacekeeper, and it has no record of embracing a regional perspective on Afghanistan, individual countries within the organisation are well positioned to use their influence in regional negotiations, in line with the UN and the US. For example, NATO nations with solid ties to Iran could help to involve Tehran in peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan; Britain has close links to Pakistan; and Germany has good contacts in the Central Asian republics.

NATO, which did not hold discussions on Pakistan or its Central Asian neighbours until 2006, could also raise its diplomatic profile in the region. One possibility would be to cooperate with existing regional organisations such as CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation or Tashkent Treaty, comprising Russia and the Central Asian republics) on collective security in Central Asia, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) on terrorism.

The United Nations

Similar to NATO, the UN has suffered from overlap and lack of coordination between UN headquarters in New York, operations on the ground in Kabul, and UN members' own agendas. The UN is understaffed in Afghanistan; even if the staff of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is doubled, as proposed for 2009, there will still only be 6,000 staff members in Afghanistan as opposed to nearly 100,000 US and NATO troops.

UNAMA could play a very helpful advisory role since its staff brings together a tremendous amount of expertise on Afghanistan, including people who speak local languages and know local actors. This critical knowledge is not really being tapped, and it might be more useful to apply these skills to stabilise select areas of the country than relying on diplomatic initiatives with few guarantees of success. The UN, rather limited in its capacity to act on its own, could also assume the role of broker in talking to different groups and actors. For example, the UN representative could meet regularly with the Afghan president and then coordinate with the ambassadors of other countries.

At the time of writing, in view of the upcoming presidential elections in Afghanistan, the UNAMA (or the EU) could help conduct a population survey, which many consider essential to help reduce tensions among different minorities and ensure a fair election. Finally, according to the recent US strategy review, the UN should resolve its coordination problems and in fact play a coordination role itself, acting as a

clearinghouse for the decisions of the international community. In this regard, it could facilitate discussions with the CSTO which is an observer organisation at the United Nations General Assembly and become the key organiser of a regional contact group.

The European Union

The European Union's role in stimulating a regional discourse on Afghanistan is still limited. The EU is an intergovernmental organisation and as such, relatively efficient, but in its foreign policy, it remains less coherent than a confederation. The EU is split among the Commission, EU member states and work on the ground. The European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan) is emblematic of the problems in launching out-of-area operations. It has been stymied by bureaucracy in Brussels, unable to do its job on the ground, and under-staffed and under-funded to the point that its officers cannot leave Kabul.

Notably, Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) since 1999, has only visited Afghanistan once, underscoring the EU's scant political interest in the operation. The bottom line is that the political will to engage Afghanistan is lacking in Europe; most European countries are in Afghanistan to be a good ally, not because they have an overall strategic goal or a common sense of what needs to be done in the region. This has translated into a lack of specific objectives and close coordination. While the EU is relatively effective in terms of security missions when they are organised by the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), the Commission was not set up to operate in war environments or coordinate a military effort.

Panel III: The role of regional actors in addressing the Afghanistan-Pakistan crisis

Iran

Iran and the US have a common objective for Afghanistan: the need to prevent the Taliban from returning to power. After 9/11, there was intermittent contact between Iran and the US regarding tracking down Al Qaeda and regime change in Afghanistan. Initially, the Iranians provided logistical support for the US intervention in Afghanistan until George W. Bush included Iran in the 'axis of evil' in mid-2002, and relations became distant again. Since 2006, Iran, in the interest of stabilising neighbouring Iraq, has contributed to the US effort there, specifically providing support for the so-called Sunni Awakening. A number of US diplomats and military personnel have called for renewed contacts with Iran and at the SCO meeting on 27 March 2009, a meeting was held between Iranians and Americans on specific cooperation issues. There have also been meetings with NATO over opening up the Chabahar route to facilitate the transit of NATO supplies. From a logistical point of view, the Chabahar route through Iran is the most practical one for transporting NATO supplies into Afghanistan, and including Iran in regional talks would facilitate an agreement in this regard.

Iran has been involved in Afghanistan at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels over the past seven years. In 2008 alone, trade between Iran and Afghanistan totalled \$1 billion, largely due to the three million refugees crossing the countries' common border. Iran's interest in stabilising Afghanistan is reinforced by its proximity to volatile areas of

Afghanistan. For example, insurgents in Farah and Nimruz Provinces move freely into Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan Province. Iran has influence with a number of non-Pashtun groups and if it feels threatened or isolated, Tehran could create further instability within Afghanistan. For example, it could foment religious tensions by supporting the minority Shiite community's revival in Afghanistan.

Iran aspires to be a key player in its neighbourhood and, as such, expects recognition of its role as a regional leader. In the context of regional talks on Afghanistan, there are three issues that affect Iran: security, drugs and refugees. Iran would be willing to negotiate if its national interests are addressed regarding these issues. Iran has run successful drug abuse programmes and has extensive experience in police training, and in converting opium fields into cotton fields. Therefore, its policies in combating drug trafficking and abuse could be of great assistance to Afghanistan. Iran has also created support programmes for the thousands of Afghan refugees crossing the Iranian border. Finally, the Iranians have observer status in the SCO, and could thus become involved in counterterrorism and other security measures.

In order to facilitate negotiations with Iran, some approaches should be avoided. First, discussions of the nuclear issue need not be a precondition for discussing other questions. Using separate baskets for all Iran-related topics, but especially drugs and terrorism, is a more practical policy since Iran is not likely to negotiate in earnest on the nuclear question given its track record to date. At the same time, Iran's nuclear programme is not relevant to the situation in Afghanistan and halting nuclear proliferation is an intricate process handled best by international organisations. Second, US rhetoric around internal regime change in Iran is anathema to leaders in Tehran who view with alarm the US base in Shindan, Afghanistan, near the Iranian border. Finally, in negotiations between NATO and Iran over the Chabahar supply route, EU countries should not approach Iran individually, because the Iranians seek

improved relations with the US rather than individual deals with European countries.

International economic sanctions should be lifted as they pose many obstacles for Iran. Funding for regional projects would create goodwill and a regional contact group could provide a useful venue. Still, existing regional initiatives should be respected; an example is the trilateral commission, which has been set up within the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), comprising Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran. The three countries have agreed to cooperate on development and cultural issues. Lastly, Iranian public opinion is extremely important, and should be factored into any political equation.

However, a final note of caution was sounded regarding the extent to which Iran can help in real terms in solving the Afghan issue. What Iran can offer may be limited in comparison with what it is requesting in exchange, and the international community should not forget the concerns it has over Iran's nuclear programme.

Russia and Central Asia

Russia has distanced itself from the hope of a long-lasting relationship with the West, and now plays a strategic game based on striking deals with Europe and the US. Rather than building trust and stressing convergence of interests, Russia has opted for achieving a strong strategic hand in any diplomatic negotiation. Both Russia and Central Asia have gained prominence in relation to Afghanistan, particularly in the wake of the decision by Kyrgyzstan to close the Manas base. Russia offered substantial development investment to induce Kyrgyzstan not to renew the lease agreement with the US in February 2009, thus acquiring partial control over the NATO supply route by forcing the US to leave Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

By inducing Bishkek to give up Manas Moscow appeared to increase its leverage, and enhanced its power monopoly over northern transit routes in Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, this

provisional advantage evaporated when Kyrgyzstan decided, in June 2009, to turn the tables and offer the Manas base lease again to the US.

Russia's quest for greater power and status and its emphasis on maintaining a multi-polar order provides the underlying rationale for its Afghanistan and Central Asia involvement. Russia clearly has security concerns in Afghanistan, primarily drug trafficking and the spread of terrorism, which motivate its engagement. Russia has restored a large part of the multilateral architecture surrounding the post-Soviet states, particularly with the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Russia uses the SCO both to solve immediate security and economic issues, and as a platform to coordinate the position of other states on Afghanistan.

The key question is whether Russia can be a problem solver in the Afghan scenario. When comparing Russia with China, it appears evident, at this point, that China can offer more potential sticks and carrots to effect behavioural change in Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Pakistan, and its massive investment makes it a real player economically, far more so than Russia. Russia wants to be part of the international game on Afghanistan, but it has little interest in Afghanistan and also relatively few concrete assets to offer. China, on the other hand, may become increasingly important in terms of creating alternatives to the Russians.

Competing agendas among regional and international powers benefit the Central Asian states, by creating more room for their manoeuvre and independent action. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have both been playing off more powerful actors to their advantage, and this is increasingly the case for Afghanistan. When the UN hinted that it was not satisfied with Karzai's leadership, he began having more proactive talks with Russia, making clear that he had other options.

These dynamics will also flavour any regional cooperation initiative. For instance, in the absence of a

strategic US policy to woo the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan by providing development aid to mitigate their increasingly desperate economic situation, these countries will look to Russia and play down cooperation with the West, as evidenced by the diplomatic charade over the Manas airbase.

The post-Soviet Central Asian countries are peculiar states. Although weak, they excel at symbolic posturing and are very concerned about maintaining the façade of functioning states. However, chronic electricity shortages, unemployment and the failure of the former Soviet system of social services are provoking social breakdown, with starvation levels seldom seen even in Afghanistan. Autocratic repressive governments in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and increasing pauperisation of the populations have also created an ideal breeding ground for recruitment of young Islamic militants, especially in the marginalised areas bordering Afghanistan.

Energy is urgently needed in the whole region. Central Asian energy supplies could help secure electricity and water for Afghanistan and provide key transit income. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are potentially major exporters of electricity to Afghanistan. Yet there is a history of tension among Afghanistan's three Central Asian neighbours because Uzbekistan wants to secure water for its own important cotton sector, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan want to develop their electricity potential. When Afghanistan claims its rights in terms of electricity and shared usage of rivers, this may provoke conflicts among the three neighbouring countries, which are notoriously unstable. Uzbekistan is perhaps the most problematic as it changes position often and its opaque political system makes it a difficult partner for all countries.

Regional trade offers great potential, and in the case of Afghanistan would provide transit income and reduced travel time. However, the Central Asian states are reluctant to open their borders to Afghanistan, for fear of drug trafficking and customs procedures that would essentially raise formal barriers to trade. A range of free-trade agreements, both bilaterally and regionally,

has been agreed upon, but rarely implemented, because the solutions and pledges are empty vessels. Iran and China are proving more reliable because they deliver in more concrete economic terms than the former Soviet states, indicating where real benefits can lie in terms of regional cooperation.

China

China has a long-term interest in the region, having been involved in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion and more prominently in Pakistan for even longer. Three main concerns dominate China's domestic and foreign policy: internal stability, specifically the security situation in Xinjiang; regional stability, focussing on Pakistan; and access to resources, which underpins a great deal of China's foreign policy.

Xinjiang

China's concern over internal stability stems from a deep-seated need to preserve the integrity of its borders. The country maintains that Xinjiang, a large autonomous region of China, comprising one sixth of its land mass and with a majority Muslim population, has always formed part of China. However, it was not until the twentieth century that the former Republic of East Turkestan came under direct control of the Han Chinese, who actively colonised the territory. China's concern for security in Xinjiang, bordering on Russia, several Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, thrusts Chinese interests into Central and South Asia. Beijing now worries that the fate of the former Russian empire on its border foreshadows its own future.

Investment in regional initiatives such as the SCO is motivated by the perceived need to contain and neutralise any efforts by Uighurs and other Muslim groups in Xinjiang to demand independence. In fact, the principal rationale for establishing the SCO was to control the Uighurs and to ensure that the Uighur dissident movement in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan would not spill into Xinjiang.

The Uighur rebellion was initially a secular nationalist movement representing generalised resentment against

Chinese policies in Xinjiang. It became radicalised largely as a result of Afghanistan, initially because of involvement in the anti-Soviet struggle and more so after 9/11. Some Uighurs have been trained in Madrassas and are protected by Pakistan, and others have joined the Taliban, but numbers of militants are estimated to be low and the riots and disturbances generally do not incorporate terrorist activities. However, the more the Uighur population of Xinjiang is alienated and impoverished, as it has been particularly over the last 20 years, the more recruits there will be for the nationalist movement.

In the short term, the war on terror enabled China to associate what was happening in Xinjiang with the global war against terrorism and thereby escape censure. The US State Department very obligingly put the East Turkestan independence movement onto its terrorist list. In the longer term though, the backlash will bring about what China most fears, which is an increased radicalisation of Uighur sentiment, as witnessed by the disturbances and protests of July 2009 in Xinjiang.

China and Pakistan

Pakistan has been a key regional instrument for Chinese foreign and domestic policy. Offering economic aid and political support to Pakistan has shielded Chinese interests from retaliation by the Taliban for the suppression of China's Muslim population. However, the Chinese are concerned that this deal with Pakistan is breaking down.

Chinese interests have recently come under attack in Pakistan. The government siege of Lal Masjid (the Red Mosque) in Islamabad in July 2007, in which 10 Chinese residents were held hostage by militants, highlighted the pressure that China puts on Pakistan in order to defend its interests. Musharaff admitted that Beijing urged Islamabad to respond to terrorism and to attack the Mosque in which over a hundred militants were eventually killed. Other Pakistani actors are now emerging who seem less interested in protecting China's interests, even against Islamic extremists. This evokes the much-feared spectre of global jihad

engulfing Xinjiang Province. China is thus likely to be faced with the necessity of keeping a heavy security presence in its western sector for the near future.

To date, China has not been particularly interested in alleviating tensions between India and Pakistan because the former is also a rival of China, and India's distraction with Pakistan suits China strategically. But the jihadist insurgency that menaces Pakistan alarms the Chinese because threats to Pakistani stability might not only destabilise Xinjiang, but could also undermine China's investment in its 10-year Western Development Programme. This programme, furthermore, depends to a large degree on access to Pakistani ports, in which China has made a huge investment.

China could provide critical support for Pakistan's counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism efforts, limited only by the latter's political will and technical competence. The Chinese are world leaders in surveillance of their own population, in detecting and breaking plots, and in maintaining internal security on a technical level. Chinese resources, technical assistance and support for training the Pakistani security services could make a big difference if the Chinese were assured this assistance would be seriously directed against the groups that so far have been covertly supported by the security services.

Access to resources

China's economy is now the world's third largest and securing raw materials to satisfy its industrial appetite is paramount. In 2008, China secured the 30-year lease on the copper concession at Aynak in Jabbar District near Kabul, the second largest undeveloped copper reserve in the world. In addition to paying more than the competitors pay, China made commitments to build infrastructure, develop a coalmine and build a power plant. If conditions in Afghanistan allow the development of this site, it will make a huge difference to Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). There may now be a convergence between US interest in rebuilding the Afghan economy and the Chinese investment in economic development – particularly

infrastructure – enhancing China’s prospects as a regional player. Consonant with this is the idea that the US could supply security for the development of the Aynak project, while the Chinese supply the investment; issues like this are very high on the US-China agenda.

Regional implications

Above all, the Chinese want stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan; but also like Tehran and Moscow, Beijing does not want a permanent or strengthened US military presence in the region. Yet the Chinese may not be willing to take responsibility for security or make a conspicuous military commitment. While they could live with a Taliban government in Afghanistan that exercised the same care for Chinese interests as did the previous one, they could not live with a hostile Islamist government or a government that tolerated jihadist efforts to destabilise Xinjiang. Given the commonality of interests, China’s constructive engagement with US-NATO regional stabilisation efforts is eminently feasible.

Saudi Arabia

The Saudis, in particular, could play a critical role in any regional negotiations given their credibility in the Muslim world. Since 9/11, the Saudis have recognised the Kabul government as being the legitimate government of Afghanistan and have ceased any formal relationship with the Taliban. However, when the Saudi government was approached by the Afghan government to open a diplomatic back channel with the Taliban, the Saudis welcomed this opportunity. The two-day meeting was exploratory with each side setting out its objectives. But the Karzai government would not recognise the Taliban and the Taliban likewise refused to admit the legitimacy of the Karzai government.

For negotiations to succeed there must be a shared desire to end 30 years of conflict and an understanding that there will be a power-sharing arrangement with no winners or losers. The different parties in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, should be made to understand that if they accept the rules of the game,

they would be in a position to run for government posts. The international community should support and build on these first halting efforts to bring the parties together.

The Pakistan-India conflict in Afghanistan has a Persian Gulf correlative: the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis do not want to see Iran expand its power and influence in Central Asia, particularly in Afghanistan. From the Saudi point of view, the presence of Iran in Iraq is a problem and they fear that Iran is raising its profile in Afghanistan as well. Therefore, if Iran becomes involved in a regional dialogue, the Saudis will also want to be take part.

The Saudis view Pakistan as a strategic ally, but they fear that the country’s alliance with the US is eroding fast and that Pakistan will become a failed state. Karachi is less than 400 km from the Gulf so it is very important for the security of the Gulf region. Riyadh could play a role in delegitimising extremism in Pakistan because of its close political relations with Islamabad. While most Saudi diplomacy has been conducted by the government, rather than civil society, religious leaders in Saudi Arabia could also play a very important role in trying to stabilise the situation, and could undertake public diplomacy in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Arab Gulf states have been reluctant to back reconstruction in Afghanistan and yet they could play a major role as investors and stabilisers in the country. They have been hampered by strong anti-American feelings among their populations and governments, and the support many of these states gave to the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s.

Regional organisations

The role of regional organisations such as the SCO and ECO has been viewed through different prisms.

While the SCO was initially conceived as a border demarcation organisation, this is now considered a simplistic view of the group, responding perhaps to a

Western desire to downplay the importance of a potentially powerful organisation. The SCO has provided the Chinese with regional standing in an area of former Soviet influence. On the other hand, the SCO provides Russia with a framework both to solve immediate security and economic issues, and as a platform to coordinate the position of other states on Afghanistan. Iran has observer status at the SCO, but aspires to full membership and has made substantial contributions to the organisation.

Today, the SCO is a large-scale organisation involved in financing Central Asian projects such as Chinese investment in Tajikistan. Currently, SCO members are involved in joint operations on crime and drugs and there is intelligence sharing on drugs and money laundering. Bilateral deals, for example between China and Uzbekistan, have been brokered within the framework of the SCO. The group has also provided Central Asian states with the opportunity to form part of a rising organisation as an alternative to their membership in CSTO and NATO's Partnership of Peace. The strong SCO position opposing US troop presence in the region reflected an alliance between Russia and China which resulted in American troops temporarily leaving Uzbekistan.

While the SCO has potential as a diplomatic alternative in the region and as an economic player, it is not clear to what extent it could deliver on Afghanistan, given the dismal record of regional organisations on conflict resolution. While pursuing regional cooperation, expectations as to what can be accomplished must be realistic. It remains to be seen whether the existing SCO contact group with Afghanistan will be willing to be absorbed into a wider US diplomatic regional effort. Some feel that the SCO's aims may still be limited despite Russia being a partner, and that the organisation is still seeking to establish a broader political and economic identity beyond the initial objective of containing Uighur nationalism and Islamism.

ECO's membership has expanded to include the Central Asian republics, Pakistan and Turkey. It is

generally considered a regional organisation with economic and political potential. Thus, Iran is interested in raising funds for ECO-run regional projects. A trilateral commission has been set up within ECO, comprising Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran and the three countries have agreed to cooperate on railroad and energy development, water conduits to Iran, and to promote cultural exchanges.

The regional contact group

Afghanistan is, unfortunately, still serving as a country where other states go to fight because they prefer not to fight each other directly. The challenges faced in the region were not created solely in Afghanistan, and the solutions must not be sought only within Afghanistan. The issues that other countries in the region have with each other and with some Western states must be systematically addressed and included in a long-term solution.

However, the immediate danger is the instability of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the stabilisation of the one is not possible without stabilisation of the other. Other regional issues cannot be resolved if the situation in both countries continues to deteriorate. In both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the focus should be on governance, democratic reform, retraining the army and police, and economic development.

The creation of a regional contact group to address these issues might produce valuable dividends. Regional neighbours need to be engaged rather than contained, and the success of such a contact group in helping to stabilise Afghanistan will depend on the perception among the participating countries that they can state their interests which will be acknowledged and discussed, and that their views will ultimately be represented in a comprehensive process for stabilising the region. Mutually incompatible actors, who may border on confrontation or conflict, could, at the same

time, negotiate and come to agreements as was the case, for example, on nuclear proliferation during the Cold War.

The discussion of a regional solution, which arose only recently, developed in part from an understanding that the Taliban already had a regional strategy and were coordinating in the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan. For example, the Afghan Taliban have negotiated with the Pakistani Taliban to conduct ceasefires so that Taliban forces can regroup to oppose the US military surge. Furthermore, the Taliban have created underground cells in Central Asia and have spread as far as Chechnya and the Caucasus.

A regional contact group might be comprised of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), representatives of NATO, the EU, and other countries bordering or in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan-Pakistan. Countries and international entities could be configured in a variety of ways. But the most discussed nations are Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India, China, Russia and the Central Asian republics. From the outset, the *raison d'être* for a regional contact group was to engage Pakistan on a variety of economic and national security issues in order to convert Islamabad into a more effective ally of the international community in combating the Afghan insurgency.

Both the UNSC and the US are considered candidates to organise a contact group. The UN was considered the best place to lead this group, since it could create a consensus in the Security Council, bringing on board countries such as Russia. Regional talks should be conducted on three levels. The first tier, possibly led by the UN, would bring together Afghanistan's six bordering nations with which there has been no dialogue yet, and attempt a consensus to stabilise Afghanistan. However, this would inevitably be a lengthy and complicated process because of rivalries and jockeying for position over regional hegemony. State failures in three of these countries (Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) make it urgent to undertake this regional diplomacy sooner rather than later.

The second tier would consist of bilateral discussions, sponsored by the US, UN or other bodies, to resolve specific issues that are clouding the situation in Afghanistan. First, it is necessary to bring Pakistan on board by focusing on its chief geopolitical concern: potential encroachment from India. India and Pakistan are virtually at war in Afghanistan and the confrontation has been ignored by the West for far too long. US Special Representative to Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke and his team – ideally with UN backing – should prioritise generating a dialogue between India and Pakistan. Once this process has been initiated, broader issues such as the resolution of the Kashmir dispute could be addressed. Iran is a key player as well and Iranian discussions with Afghanistan and Pakistan are necessary, while those between Tehran and Washington are critical. Above all, it is important to address bilateral issues independently of the situation in Afghanistan or the region.

A third tier would comprise a wider contact group, alluded to by President Obama, including near neighbours and important players such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Japan. This grouping could also be headed by a more aggressive and finely tuned UNSC. An experienced diplomat should be placed in charge of the contact group, with concerted EU and US backing.

On the other hand, one concern is that the UN might merely be a front for US Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke; moreover, in this case UN Special Representative Kay Eide's role would be diminished. UN involvement will depend largely on the degree of commitment – at present considered somewhat tepid – by the UN Secretary General. There was no consensus over whether Iran, Russia or India might object to US leadership of the contact group, or whether in fact they were more interested in dealing directly with the US than the UN (or the EU) in order to obtain real concessions.

Another problem is that neighbouring countries may expect the Western alliance to fail in Afghanistan and therefore see no reason to join a regional contact group

and negotiate with a weak party. The delivery of heavy weapons into northern Afghanistan from adjacent areas over the past two years appears to be an attempt by these countries to cover their bets. Regional negotiations are more likely to have successful outcomes when the international community can initiate talks from a position of strength, buttressed by a long-term commitment. Otherwise, it will be difficult to count on adjacent nations' support or to obtain concessions from Russia or Iran, which in any case have conflicting agendas with the West. It is still an open question whether a regional approach to Afghanistan amounts to little more than a neutralisation of its neighbours and their capacity to interfere with state-building in that country.

Practical recommendations

Despite the political shoals of a contact group, a regional dialogue could foster much needed economic and infrastructural development. Roads and railways need to be built to link Afghanistan with its neighbours as part of a common economic policy. Pakistan has offered to construct a railway from Quetta to Kandahar. The Germans have proposed a railway between Termez and Mazar-e-Sharif, and there have been proposals to build railways from Dushanbe in Tajikistan down to Kunduz. These transit projects would be essential in promoting regional trade.

A regional energy strategy is vital to combating chronic energy shortage, especially of electricity, in the entire region. Investment and long-term planning are required with the backing of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European powers.

Inter-state development on several fronts could bring mutual benefits. Development plans between northern Afghanistan and southern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan could help combat increasing poverty and stem the recruitment of young fighters. Cooperation between eastern Iran and western Afghanistan could halt drug trafficking and encourage the Iranians to develop cross-border infrastructure and improve security.

Pakistan needs to be persuaded to allow India to use its territory to trade directly with Afghanistan; this would improve Pakistani relations with both other countries. Crucially, there must be cross-border development between the NWFP and FATA and the Afghan Pashtun provinces bordering Pakistan, rather than separate aid policies divided by the Durand Line. Cross-border projects would promote cooperation and could ultimately lead to peace.

NATO also urgently needs to open new supply routes into Afghanistan which could then be leveraged to put pressure on Pakistan to stop playing a double game in Afghanistan. Discussions could be hosted by individual European countries, or through the NATO platform, to get the routes through Iran and Russia-Central Asia functioning and to open the route through Turkmenistan.

Yet, the question remains as to what concrete benefits can be derived from engaging with Russia and the Central Asian states. Since the trend is toward more realistic assessments of progress in Afghanistan, should the expectations over the work of a regional contact group be lowered? The benefits of working bilaterally and on smaller concrete issues might be considered a more productive avenue to pursue. Likewise, existing organisations should be acknowledged and supported in order to make them more effective, rather than just imposing another multilateral forum on the region.

Final considerations

Against the gloomy backdrop of ever worsening violence from Afghanistan, President Barack Obama, prioritising the country's crisis for the first time in eight years, outlined a tri-partite plan in Afghanistan. It includes 1) a military surge; 2) increased resources for governance, economic and social development for both Afghanistan and Pakistan; and significantly 3) a call for regional diplomacy among Afghanistan's neighbours. The latter might ideally culminate in a

contact group, which would create the conditions for the positive involvement of Afghanistan's neighbours in seeking solutions to the crises of both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Advantages of a regional approach

There are many reasons why a comprehensive regional approach could be an important step towards stabilising Afghanistan and Pakistan. First and foremost, regional diplomacy could begin by addressing Pakistan's security concerns *vis-à-vis* India, as they relate to both Afghanistan and Kashmir. Moreover, it could succeed in opening borders between Pakistan, Afghanistan and India while persuading the latter to become more transparent about its activities in Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and India might begin exploring whether the covert war they have waged against each other for the past 60 years could spare the territory of Afghanistan. In general, Pakistan needs assurance that the international community is committed to its territorial integrity.

Development is just as critical as counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts in checking the spread of militancy in the region. A contact group could press for regional economic and security integration, including counternarcotics, more open markets and trade routes, and could coordinate and integrate international aid to the region; this should encourage the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to help set up joint reconstruction programmes in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The group might induce Moscow to play a more constructive role in the region's stabilisation so that Afghanistan does not become a test of wills between the United States and Russia. Regional diplomacy might better tackle Russia's main concern regarding the expansion and possible permanent installation of US and NATO military bases in the region. It could also provide guarantees to Tehran that the US-NATO commitment in Afghanistan is not a threat to Iran, and that Afghan territory would not be used – overtly or covertly – as a staging area to undermine Iran. The

involvement of Iran could generate more cooperation around common security concerns, including drug trafficking and terrorism, encourage cross-border trade and communication, and facilitate the opening of new NATO supply lines through Iran, thereby lessening Western dependency on Pakistani logistics.

Finally, a regional contact group could enhance China's role in stabilising the region by addressing its main concern: security threats from Uighur militants in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China, and their sympathisers in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. An increased emphasis on economic development could take the form of a north-south energy and trade corridor and, as with Russia, incline them more to an acceptance of the UN presence.

Caveats in pursuing a regional approach

There are many shoals on the way to success for a regionally-based international effort. The challenges in promoting it are indeed great for an international community that has yet to find an effective way to coordinate its own role in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is at the crossroads for several regional groupings, and forming a coherent regional group may prove difficult. Moreover, there is no consensus on what kind of Afghanistan is acceptable to all countries having a stake. Complex bilateral rivalries, including – but not limited to – Pakistan-India, Iran-Saudi Arabia, and Russia-United States, characterise the region and could derail a regional solution to Afghanistan.

An approach that relies on regional states may encounter weaknesses inherent in the states themselves. Afghanistan and its neighbourhood are fragmented and complex; the countries are often impoverished, competing for resources and displaying mutual distrust and resentment. These weaknesses also compound the difficulty of dealing with multiple war zones within Afghanistan. Finally, globalisation has weakened state actors, and existing regional organisations such as the SCO, while potentially strong

players currently have their own agendas and, in any case, may not wield real influence.

Russia and Central Asia are indispensable elements in any regional effort, but there is no strong evidence that Central Asian countries wish to be directly involved in Afghanistan security strategies. Central Asian development issues, particularly water and energy, are gaining growing importance and are a further source of regional tension. Russia, as well as China, may be more interested in bilateral relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan than in any regional grouping inspired and led by the US. Iran is a key actor in any regional dialogue, but it views the role of Saudi Arabia with considerable wariness and, of course, is still hostile to the intentions of the main international actor there: the United States. Another risk is that Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China, all wary of the US military build-up, will respond tepidly to US-led regional diplomacy.

The overarching goal of convincing Pakistan to change its strategic view and policies toward Afghanistan, and to begin exerting control over the border areas, may be a Sisyphean task. The profound lack of trust between Kabul and Islamabad, and the constant undercurrent of accusations and hostility between the two countries is a serious obstacle to integrating Pakistan into an effective regional approach. Moreover, a major paradox in the 'Af-Pak' conundrum is the dependence on a state that has been working with an enemy whose army was being funded by the US to fight and defeat. Islamic militants in both countries are considered by many in the Pakistani ISI and military as crucial strategic assets to block Indian influence in Kashmir and Afghanistan, and recapture the hegemony they enjoyed over the latter in the 1990s.

Despite Islamabad's declarations of solidarity with the US and the West after 9/11, it is an open question whether a contact group, or even the US or China, which is a major supplier of arms and nuclear equipment to Pakistan, has the leverage to modify significantly the military's bedrock attitudes toward India and Afghan and Pakistani militants. Consequently, it is not clear how the Pakistanis view

the Taliban reconciliation process or how they would exert their influence to stabilise Afghanistan and, at the same time, protect their perceived national interests.

Regional dialogue might produce a creative and flexible approach and should at least be tried given the failures of the alternatives in the past eight years. However, in the final analysis, we are still left wondering what exactly the group's focus would be. What could a contact group or any diplomacy achieve? Although bilateral discussions may create suspicion, they might bear more political fruit than a regional contact group, as might be the case with discussions between Islamabad and New Delhi. If the contact group goes forward, it should probably be kept small and meet outside the public purview.

Ultimately, whatever the good intentions of a contact group, it may be brought up short by realities on the ground in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. An augmented US and NATO military presence with escalating US-ISAF (International Assistance Security Force) military operations could complement regional diplomacy or thwart it. A 'military surge', with attendant civilian casualties from both air strikes and ground operations, risks undermining any regional dialogue on Afghanistan. Likewise, the continued use of cross-border drone attacks into Pakistan jeopardises the possibilities of reaching out to Islamabad through a regional dialogue.

It is still not altogether clear at this juncture how honestly the US and NATO are taking the notion of regional diplomacy. The current strategy seems more fixated on staying a military course than pursuing regional diplomacy. A decision by the US or NATO to pull up stakes in Afghanistan appears to be unthinkable because, it is argued, it would deal a crippling blow both to the credibility of US power and to the alliance's military efficacy. Yet, the Taliban, for their part, believe they are already winning and they too will likely opt for more war and less negotiation to enhance their own bargaining position.

Since a conventional army must win in order not to lose, and a guerrilla movement only has to avoid

losing in order to win, privileging a military course of action over an earnest effort to activate a diplomatic track may come to be seen as a serious blunder. Like the fate of the US in the Vietnam War, the already tarnished prestige of the nations and institutions

comprising the international alliance in Afghanistan could eventually be more damaged by gambling their investment in Afghanistan on more war than by turning now towards a negotiated exit strategy within a regional context.

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The March 30 Madrid conference on the regional dimensions of the Afghanistan-Pakistan crisis examined the possibilities and pitfalls of developing a regional approach to the mounting conflicts in these south Asian nations. The varied security and economic interests of Russia, Central Asia, Iran, India, China and the Gulf States as well as those of the international community and its organizations were discussed in detail.

A key conference element was assessing the formation of a contact group that would develop a regional diplomacy to address the deteriorating security situation in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Such multilateral diplomacy does not preclude considering the efficacy of bilateral talks where more appropriate and on concrete issues may prove productive in advancing a regional solution.

Among the many advantages in creating a contact group, the most important task is addressing Pakistan's security concerns as a precondition for gaining the military's cooperation in controlling their western border areas with Afghanistan and rethinking their past support for the Afghan Taliban.

Obstacles to the contact group include weaknesses inherent in Afghanistan's neighbouring states which are complex and fragmented; they may also compete for resources and display mutual distrust and resentment. The realities of escalating US-NATO military operations in Afghanistan and air strikes in Pakistan could also undermine the best-intended regional dialogue on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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