

Afghanistan, NATO and the Regional States: Challenges and Responses

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Abstract

Ambiguous, often contradictory, assessments of the achievements of NATO/ISAF operations in Afghanistan make it difficult to form a clear picture of the situation on the ground. However, despite the rhetoric of politicians and military leaders who speak of 'sticking it out' till the job is done, there are unmistakable signals that the endgame has started. The emphasis now is on fashioning an exit strategy that will justify the claim of 'mission accomplished'. It is ironic that it is only now, with the dawning awareness that 'a victor's peace is impossible', that the importance of involving the regional states is finally being recognized. With the exception of Pakistan, which from the outset played a strategic role in Western-led operations, there was an implicit reluctance, amounting to a virtual ban, on cooperating with these states as equal partners. China, Russia and Iran were largely ignored, while the Central Asian states were regarded mainly as transit routes. Yet by geography, history, ethnic ties and culture, Afghanistan is an integral part of the region. The 'neighbourhood' states are neither unaware nor indifferent to what happens there. Before and since 2001 there have been regional initiatives aimed at promoting stability and development in Afghanistan. This paper gives an overview of the main initiatives, bilateral and multilateral which seek to promote the country's re-integration into regional cultural, economic and security networks.

Keywords: NATO, Afghanistan, ISAF, Western-led operations.

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Introduction

Ambiguous, often contradictory, assessments of the achievements of NATO/ISAF operations in Afghanistan make it difficult to form a clear picture of the situation on the ground. However, despite the rhetoric of politicians and military leaders who speak of 'sticking it out' till the job is done, there are unmistakable signals that, as Lord Ashdown commented in November 2010, the endgame has started. Whether or not a workable strategy has finally been put in place is uncertain, but the emphasis now is to fashion an exit strategy that will justify, however weakly, the claim of 'mission accomplished'. It is ironic that it is only at this stage, with the dawning awareness that 'a victor's peace is impossible', that the importance of involving the regional states is finally being recognised. With the exception of Pakistan, which from the outset played a strategic role in Western-led operations, there was an implicit reluctance, amounting to a virtual ban, on cooperating with these states as equal partners. China, Russia and Iran were largely ignored, while the Central Asian states were regarded mainly as transit routes. Yet by geography, history, ethnic ties and culture, Afghanistan is an integral part of the region. The 'neighbourhood' states are neither unaware nor indifferent to what happens there. Before and since 2001 there have been regional initiatives aimed at promoting stability and development in Afghanistan.

1991-2001: An Emerging Threat

Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989. Two years later,



the Soviet Union disintegrated. This short but momentous sequence of events left the newly independent Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – in a highly exposed position. Not only were they suddenly confronted with massive domestic challenges, they also faced a growing security threat along their southern rim as Afghanistan descended into anarchy.

The three Central Asian states that share borders with Afghanistan (Tajikistan – 1,206 km, Turkmenistan – 744 km, Uzbekistan – 137 km) were particularly at risk. Their newly-formed national defence and security forces were still weak and under-equipped. Their populations, disoriented by the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, were vulnerable to criminal and/or ideological manipulation. On several occasions the leaders of the Central Asian states tried to alert the international community to the danger of the situation, which was not only destroying Afghanistan, but generating a destructive momentum that could spread far beyond its frontiers. Their warnings were not heeded.

Central Asian Initiatives: Pre-2001

In the mid-1990s, the Central Asian states put forward their own initiatives to address the Afghan issue. They saw from the outset that it was vital to establish an inclusive Afghan national government, and that this could only be realized through peaceful dialogue between the main actors. Uzbek President Islam Karimov called for the creation of a dedicated multilateral forum of ‘friends and neighbours’ of Afghanistan to serve as a mechanism through which to seek a peaceful settlement. The innovative aspect of this proposal was that it recognised the need to engage the neighbouring states as well as the major extra-territorial actors – Russia and the United States – in the peace process. In 1997, Uzbekistan launched a series of diplomatic consultations to lay the groundwork for the formation of what came to be known as the ‘Six plus Two’ Contact Group, comprising the six



states that neighbour Afghanistan – China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – together with Russia and the United States. In July 1999, under the aegis of the UN, the Tashkent Declaration ‘On Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan’, was signed (UN Security Council Press Release 6743. 22 October 1999). Over the next couple of years high-level meetings were held to coordinate policy approaches.

The second regional initiative was conducted by Turkmenistan. Unlike the ‘Six plus Two’ Group, which focused on external actors, the Turkmen government’s efforts were directed towards the promotion of peaceful dialogue between the internal actors. Discreet contacts between the various parties were held on Afghan or Turkmen territory, as dictated by circumstances. The process was eased by the good offices of the Afghan Turkmen community located in the border area. The objective was to create an enabling environment for friendly exchanges. Turkmenistan had adopted a similar approach during the Tajik civil war, hosting leaders of the warring factions for long periods in order to provide them with the opportunity to work through their differences. This had made a significant contribution to the peaceful resolution of that conflict, achieved in June 1997. It was largely in recognition of Turkmenistan’s positive role in this process that the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy was later established in Ashgabat.

By the turn of the millennium neither the Uzbek nor the Turkmen initiative had produced dramatic results, but they had established channels of communication that were beginning to yield some degree of mutual understanding and cooperation. How useful it would have been to continue to explore these avenues it is impossible to say, since both processes were brought to an abrupt halt in the autumn of 2001.

2001: A New Dynamic

By mid-2001, the Taliban, with al-Qaida support, had gained control of most parts of Afghanistan. On 9 September, the ethnic Tajik



Ahmad Shah Masoud, leader of the Northern Alliance, was killed in a suicide bomb attack, allegedly master-minded by al-Qaida. Two days later, air strikes were carried out against US cities. Washington held al-Qaida responsible. When the Taliban refused to hand over its leader, Osama bin Laden, the United States, with British support, launched a devastating air and ground assault on Afghanistan. Pakistan was the main US ally in this campaign, but the Central Asian states also played a role, providing transit facilities. This was not unexpected, since all five states were members of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) Programme. Uzbekistan, which had had bilateral military ties with the United States since 1995,^[8] agreed to host a US base at Karshi-Khanabad, close to the Afghan border; it also granted basing rights to Germany in the same vicinity. Kyrgyzstan likewise gave permission for a US base at Manas, the international civilian airport close to the capital, Bishkek and some 500 km from the Chinese border.

On 5 December 2001, the leaders of the main political Afghan factions met in Bonn to sign an agreement whereby an Interim Administration was created, headed by Hamid Karzai. Two weeks later, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution establishing the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This coalition, formed of US and allied troops, was charged with the task of securing Kabul and its environs against terrorist insurgencies; it was also required to work closely with the Interim Administration (UN Security Council Resolution 1386. 20 December 2001). 'Victory', it seemed, had been achieved swiftly and surprisingly easily. It was anticipated that the military phase would now merge seamlessly into a programme to deliver aid and development to the shattered country.

In Central Asia these developments were viewed with optimism, especially in official circles. In China, Russia and Iran, Western 'boots on the ground' could not but cause dismay. However, there was nothing they could do to prevent this. Moreover, it was tacitly acknowledged there were advantages in this development, since the situation in Afghanistan would now be resolved with no effort on



their part. For Iran in particular, home to some 2.4 million Afghan refugees, this was an important consideration. Moreover, Tehran had been firmly opposed to the Taliban since their first appearance on the scene and as early as 1996 had accused them of defaming Islam. Thus, whatever concerns Iran may have had about the increased presence of Western forces within the region, it was nevertheless prepared to offer quiet, but active, support.

By the end of November most of the Taliban had been routed and the leadership had fled the country. On 5 December 2001, the leaders of the main political Afghan factions met in Bonn to sign an agreement whereby an Interim Administration was created, headed by Hamid Karzai. The speed with which the Bonn Agreement was concluded seemed to validate the confidence that was felt throughout the region in the ability of the Western powers to impose order and stability. Afghanistan, it was believed, was firmly set on the road to recovery. These expectations were premature. The new Afghan administration was by no means fully in control of the situation. A regional/factional power struggle was still in progress and the fighting continued. There was a growing humanitarian crisis, as a million or more refugees fled Afghanistan to seek asylum in the neighbouring states. Drug-production, which had diminished significantly in 2000-2001, increased at an alarming rate. Moreover, cross-border terrorist activities, temporarily disrupted by the coalition raids on Afghanistan, were resumed as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian militant groups that had set up bases in Afghanistan rallied their forces and re-established their positions.

NATO-ISAF Operations: Regional Responses

In 2003, NATO took command of ISAF. Initially, 5,000 troops were deployed, but this number steadily increased as the mission expanded to encompass ever more of the country. The original aims – securing Kabul – were overlaid by a multi-faceted project of nation-building and state-building. Two years later there was no sign of the Western



military presence coming to an end: rather, there were rumours that the US bases might become permanent (Kazem, 14 April 2005). Meanwhile, in Central Asia there was growing disillusionment with the NATO-ISAF mission. The political and economic rewards for the support provided by the Central Asian states were not as significant as had been anticipated. Specifically, there was dissatisfaction over the terms and conditions for the use of basing facilities. Originally, rent had been set at a low level, as a gesture of support for what was expected to be a short engagement. It soon became clear that this was not the case. Uzbek President Karimov was openly critical of US policies, which he believed were exacerbating, not resolving, regional security problems. In 2004 the Uzbek government began sending official notes to Washington, requesting clarification of issues relating to the presence of US troops on its territory. They were ignored – or at least not treated with due urgency.

It was against this background of deteriorating relations that in May 2005 there was an outbreak of violence in the Uzbek town of Andijan. In Europe and the USA, the predominant view was that the Uzbek security forces massacred thousands of innocent civilians. This was adamantly denied by the Uzbek authorities, who insisted that there had been an armed insurgency. Moreover, there was a suspicion (not confined to Uzbekistan) that there had been covert Western involvement in the affair, aimed at toppling the recalcitrant Karimov government and replacing it with a friendlier regime. Western governments and organizations introduced various punitive restrictions in their dealings with Uzbekistan; the European Union went furthest, imposing sanctions. By contrast, outside the Western bloc these actions were mostly seen as hasty and ill-judged, and likewise as an example of ‘double standards’, since no such measures were taken against Israel despite its repeated use of ‘excessive force’ against civilians.

Regional dissatisfaction with the Western-led coalition came to a head at the Summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation



Organisation (SCO) in Astana in July 2005 that year. Although still very young, the Organisation had already established itself as a significant regional structure (see section below). The final statement of this Summit included the request that, in the light of ‘the completion of the active military stage of antiterrorist operations in Afghanistan ... respective members of the antiterrorist coalition set a final timeline for their temporary use of the above mentioned objects of infrastructure and stay of their military contingents on the territories of the SCO member states.’ This was interpreted by most Western commentators as a belligerent demand for an instant US/NATO withdrawal from the region. This it certainly was not, but it did reflect a concern that the Western-led mission in Afghanistan was losing focus and developing into an open-ended commitment. Shortly after the Astana Summit, Tashkent served notice on the US base at Karshi-Khanabad, demanding that it be vacated within six months (Lumpe, 2010 (a): 11). This decision reflected the deterioration in US-Uzbek relations and was not linked to SCO policy. It is noteworthy that the Germans were allowed to retain the use of their base in Uzbekistan and in Kyrgyzstan, and the US base at Manas continued to function, albeit in return for a better financial package.

Nine Years On

Nine years after the launch of operations against Afghanistan, the NATO-ISAF mission encompassed the whole of Afghanistan; the force now numbered some 130,400 troops, from 48 countries. One of the most important achievements was the re-creation of the state. During the civil war in the 1990s, institutions of governance and state management had all but ceased to exist. During the 2000s, a functioning political and administrative apparatus was re-instated. Moreover, a shared sense of national identity, shattered by the civil war, re-emerged. Welfare and development programmes, campaigns for women’s rights, the provision of education and training facilities



and other such initiatives also had a beneficial effect. However, these achievements were still fragile. If the coalition left too soon, it was very possible that whatever progress had been made would be lost, putting the country and the entire region at risk (International Crisis Group, 2010). Yet it was not feasible to contemplate a commitment that would stretch into the distant future, with no guarantee of eventual success (however that might be defined). It was time for a new strategy.

NATO-ISAF and Regional Engagement

A shift in the coalition's approach to Afghanistan was signalled by a gradual acceptance of the need to collaborate with regional players. Initially, it took the form of requests for additional transit facilities. This was necessary partly because of the increased volume of supplies for Afghanistan, partly because of the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan. The Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan was still an important transit hub, but its future was constantly threatened by corruption scandals and political intrigues. It was in response to these pressures that the concept of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) was formulated. A trans-Eurasian complex of supply routes, stretching from the Baltic Sea and the Caucasus to Afghanistan, it was launched in 2009. The key states were Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. At first, they only agreed to the transport of non-lethal cargoes (e.g. food and construction materials) across their territories, but in early 2011 Russia and Kazakhstan permitted some military supplies as well. The intention was that the NDN would not only serve the interests of the coalition forces, but would benefit the regional states by expanding – or more accurately, reviving – transport and trade links.

However, the primary concern for the neighbouring states was not trade, but security. In some respects the situation was worse than it had been pre-2001. Terrorism and militant religious extremism were resurgent, organised crime had spiralled out of control. These



problems were exacerbated by the massive increase in the drug trade. Opium cultivation in Afghanistan in 2001 covered 8,000 hectares, but by 2007 had risen to 193,000 hectares; in the same period, drug production rose from 185 metric tons to 8,200 tons (UNODC, 2009: 1, 16). Over the next two years both cultivation and production decreased somewhat, but this was only partly due to counter-narcotics operations. An important factor was that there had been major overproduction in the preceding years. Consequently, there were huge stockpiles along trafficking routes. They were possibly regarded as a hedge against falling prices in the future, but they could also be used to fund terrorist activities (UNODC, 2009: 10). All the neighbouring countries were used as transit routes for drug-trafficking, with final destinations across the world. An estimated 75-80 tons of Afghan heroin ended up in Russia each year, fuelling a catastrophic level of addiction, drug-related crimes and social problems. Iran, a border state and one of the main transit routes, was even more vulnerable. Massive, persistent action by the Iranian authorities to curb the trafficking brought impressive successes in terms of the volume of seizures. However, apart from the financial burden, it took a high toll of the lives of police officers. Moreover, it was impossible to prevent the flow of drugs leaching into the population at large, resulting in spiralling levels of addiction (Saghafi-Ameri, 2010: 214-35). The situation was similar in other regional states, including Afghanistan (UNODC, 2009: 11).

This, then, was the dilemma: the NATO-ISAF intervention had brought a degree of internal order to Afghanistan, yet it had not reduced the security threat for the 'neighbourhood' but instead had heightened it. Nevertheless, there was still the hope that if the coalition remained long enough, and was adequately resourced, it would eradicate, or at least reduce the level of danger. More pertinently, there was no obvious alternative to NATO. The armed forces of the regional states varied considerably in strength and ability; moreover, their primary concern was national defence. As for



regional security structures, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) were, in their present configurations, less than a decade old. They had skilled troops and invaluable local knowledge, but in terms of numbers, resources and collective experience they were not in the same league as NATO. Consequently, if the coalition forces were withdrawn from Afghanistan, they could not be replaced by regional counterparts. Even if there was the political will to undertake such a mission – which was by no means certain – there was not the military capability. Thus, there would be a security vacuum.

The regional ‘solution’ was to encourage NATO-ISAF to remain engaged in Afghanistan by offering vital operational support. However, this support also served a local agenda, enabling the ‘neighbourhood’ players to strengthen their role in the mission and ultimately to assume ownership.

2010: Beginning of the Endgame for NATO-ISAF?

A timetable for withdrawal was formally announced at the NATO Summit in Lisbon in November 2010. The stated goal was a phased transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan government within four years. However, senior NATO officials, including Secretary-General Rasmussen, stressed that the date was not a deadline but an aspiration. The emphasis would shift to the training of Afghan forces and the provision of military aid, but NATO-ISAF combat operations could continue beyond 2014 (Erlanger, 2010). The widely reported shortcomings of the Afghan army and police (including high levels of desertion, rampant drug addiction and infiltration by insurgents), suggested that despite the political pressures to reduce the coalition’s role, in practical terms it would be difficult to accomplish this without severely compromising security.

There were two other strands to the NATO ‘winding down’ strategy. One was to engage with the Taliban. This was easier to propose than to implement. Firstly, the Taliban were apparently re-



gaining power and popular support and hence were in no hurry to come to the negotiating table. Secondly, they were not a unified group and it was difficult to identify a common political platform. Thirdly, the leaders were elusive and making physical contact was difficult. This was neatly illustrated by an episode in 2010, when a taxi driver from Quetta persuaded Western intelligence agents that he was a senior Taliban figure; after several high-level meetings he disappeared with booty of hundreds of thousands of dollars – just as he was about to be unmasked as an imposter.

The other strand was closer collaboration with regional states and institutions. As mentioned above, this process had already been set in motion with the inauguration of the Northern Distribution Network. The initiative was underpinned by bilateral contacts between senior NATO representatives and government officials in the respective countries. In Central Asia, particular attention was paid to Kazakhstan, the most active member of the NATO PfP Programme. Meanwhile, the relationship with Uzbekistan, derailed by the violence in Andijan in 2005, was back on track and gaining in importance. In 2009, a number of security-sector agreements were concluded between the two countries, among them an outline programme of military-to-military contacts, signed by the Uzbek Defence Minister and the then CENTCOM Commander, General Petraeus. Developments such as these suggested that Uzbekistan had now regained its position as the lead US partner in the region. Prospects for Russian-NATO cooperation were also improving. Russian, US and Afghan counter-narcotics agencies carried out their first joint operation in Afghanistan in October 2010, destroying drug supplies with a street value of over US \$250 million. In November, Russian President Medvedev participated in the Lisbon Summit and reiterated the need for cooperation between NATO and CSTO, particularly with regard to counter-narcotics operations. Fortuitously, in July 2010 a former Russian diplomat, Yuri Fedotov, was appointed to head the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).



There was one other development that attracted attention at this time. Despite the frequent emphasis on NATO's intention to wind down combat operations and eventually to hand over responsibility for security issues to the Afghan authorities, it was noticeable that US airbases in Afghanistan were being upgraded. The scale of the multi-million construction projects at Bagram, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and Shindand suggested that far from withdrawing, the US forces were planning to stay for many more years. The location of these facilities, near the borders with Iran, Pakistan and the Central Asian states, prompted speculation that there was a wider political agenda (Xiaoqiang, 2010); (Nasuti, 2010). It was not inconceivable that the US might seek to secure 'sovereign status' for these bases, similar to that of the British bases in Cyprus. This would extend the US reach into the heart of Eurasia.

Regional Initiatives: Post-2001

Meanwhile, within the region other developments were taking place. In the early stages of the NATO-ISAF mission the regional states had been ignored or regarded as potential 'spoilers' – part of the problem, not the solution (Rubin, 2001). Consequently, they were excluded from reconstruction and development projects, despite the fact that they had relevant professional skills and experience. Instead, contracts were awarded predominantly to Western companies and consultants. Trade between Afghanistan and its neighbours, previously quite extensive, had plummeted after the Western intervention (Starr, 2007: Tables 1a and 1 b, 199-200). Educational and academic exchanges were likewise halted. The result was that Afghanistan became isolated from its neighbours.

Gradually, however, this process was reversed. Over the past decade links with regional bodies have been reinvigorated and new initiatives are now being launched. One channel of interaction is Afghanistan's membership of broad-based regional organisations such as the Economic Cooperation Organisation, South-Asian



Association for Regional Cooperation, Organisation of the Islamic Conference and Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. These bodies play a valuable role in re-integrating Afghanistan into the wider region, giving it visibility in regional debates and creating opportunities for collaboration in regional projects. This in turn leads to 'enhanced coordination of Afghanistan's regional engagement' (Kabul Conference, 2010).

A more specific role is played by Afghanistan's neighbours and near neighbours. Their proximity creates physical and cultural ties, shared vulnerabilities and shared opportunities. One aspect of their involvement is participation with international agencies that deal with issues relating to Afghanistan. Of particular importance are those that combat drug trafficking and other forms of organised crime, notably UNODC and affiliated institutions such as the Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Centre. Another form of cooperation is represented by regional initiatives. These take different forms and vary considerably in scope and effectiveness. Some are small-scale and operate on an ad hoc basis. Others are larger and institutionally more developed, thus have a wider impact. The main 'neighbourhood' initiatives are discussed below.

Humanitarian, Cultural and Economic Initiatives

Humanitarian assistance and development aid is mostly rendered on a bilateral basis, according to the capabilities and policies of individual states. In sum total, their input has been significant, including the construction of roads, communication units, hospitals and schools. Education and training courses have also been provided, as well as assistance with mine clearance and other security-related activities. Private sector commercial ties, too, are developing. These are mostly related to cross-border trade, but there has also been some investment in the development of Afghanistan's natural resources. To date, the largest joint economic venture is a Chinese project, estimated to be worth around US\$3.5 billion, to develop one of the



world's biggest copper deposits.

Iran is one of the largest donors to Afghanistan. In addition to humanitarian projects worth over US\$500 million, it has also made a major contribution to reconstruction projects, particularly in western Afghanistan. It has likewise provided substantial economic support. Trade between the two countries is facilitated by improved road and rail links, as well as a massive discount on Afghan imports; turnover in 2008 amounted to almost US\$1 billion and has the potential to grow further (Shahid, 2009). India, another major regional donor to Afghanistan, provided over US\$1.2 billion in 2001-2009 for aid and development projects (Shahid, 2009). The Central Asian states have also made important contributions. Kazakhstan, the only Central Asian country to have a dedicated Assistance Programme for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan, allocated some US\$3 million in 2007-2008 for undertakings that included the rehabilitation of agriculture (seed supply) as well as various construction projects. For 2009-2011, Kazakhstan has increased the aid allocation to US\$5 million for projects related to water supply, infrastructure development and the delivery of grains and other commodities. It is also providing a range of grants for education.

Multilateral projects involve various sets of 'neighbourhood' states. Some of these draw on a common cultural heritage. In 2007, for example, an 'alliance' of the Persian-speaking countries of Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan was inaugurated. This encourages collaboration in cultural projects as well as in such areas such as agriculture and finance. Another grouping brings together Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Russia and Pakistan. Launched in Dushanbe in July 2009, this quadrilateral structure aims to strengthen regional security, as well as social and economic cooperation, with special emphasis on transport, communications and energy networks. All four states are involved in the construction of a high voltage power transmission line from Central Asia to South Asia (CASA-1000). Supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and other



international financial institutions, this project will enable Tajikistan to export electricity to Pakistan via Afghanistan. It will also benefit other regional states, such as Kyrgyzstan.

Projects to construct oil and gas pipelines from Turkmenistan's eastern gas fields to Pakistan, via Afghanistan to India (TAPI) have been under discussion since 1997. The difficult physical geography of the region, as well as chronic political instability, delayed the implementation of these projects. Nevertheless, negotiations on the TAPI gas pipeline have gradually made progress. When completed, the pipeline will deliver 90 million cubic metres of gas a day; most of this will be divided equally between India and Pakistan, but Afghanistan will have a share of approximately 10 per cent. The boost to the local economies will be enormous. The project is supported by the ADB and has high level political backing from the participating states. In December 2010, Intergovernmental Agreements on the construction of the gas pipeline were concluded and by late May 2011 pricing, transit fees and gas specification issues were being finalised, opening the way to the realisation of the project in the near future.

Multilateral Economic Structures

The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) programme is a key mobilizing force for infrastructural projects. An ADB initiative, it was founded in 1997 with the aim of promoting regional economic cooperation, thereby to improve living standards and reduce poverty. Partnerships have been established with numerous international financial institutions and agencies, also with regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Current membership includes Afghanistan, the five Central Asian states, China, Russia, Mongolia, and Azerbaijan. CAREC has become a platform for marshalling the financial resources required for the implementation of large-scale projects in transport, energy, trade policy, and trade facilitation. Several of these involve Afghanistan, notably the CASA-1000 power transmission line



and the TAPI pipeline mentioned above. Other projects include the construction of road, rail and power transmission links between Afghanistan and neighbouring states such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

A second multilateral initiative is the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA). It was inaugurated by the government of Afghanistan in 2005, with the support of international partners. Members are drawn from a wide range of regional and international partners. However, the RECCA rationale is grounded in the concept that 'regional cooperation with Afghanistan begins with the support of regional neighbours, bears great potential and is effective when it is regionally owned, steered and governed in a sincere, transparent and constructive manner'(Istanbul Declaration, 2010). Key agenda items include project-based cooperation in trade, border management, energy, mining, private sector development, education and vocational training. Four major meetings have been held: in Kabul (2005), Delhi (2006), Islamabad (2009) and Istanbul (2010). In May 2010, the Centre for Regional Cooperation was created at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul to serve as the RECCA Secretariat. A Core Group to facilitate the coordination of Afghanistan's regional engagement was inaugurated in November in 2010.

Regional Dialogue-Building Projects

The initiatives discussed above are of a practical nature. Some are easier to implement than others, but in most cases the objectives are defined and the steps that need to be taken to bring them to fruition are apparent. Dialogue-building projects are more complex. They require skilful diplomacy, patience, persistence and commitment from all concerned. Such projects may sometimes seem overly idealistic, but they are surely worth pursuing since dialogue is a prerequisite for confidence-building. As mentioned previously, in the 1990s, in the midst of the civil war, there were two regional attempts to promote an



‘Afghan dialogue’. One was the Turkmen initiative to facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue, the other the Uzbek ‘Six plus Two’ initiative to create a contact group for the main external players. Currently, both concepts are being revived in an updated format.

The Turkmen proposal is still firmly focused on confidence-building and dialogue between the different factions within Afghanistan. The new element is that it seeks to pursue this in partnership with UN agencies. One of these is the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), inaugurated in Ashgabat in December 2007, the other the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Given that each agency has its own geographical and political mandate it is necessary, but not easy, to coordinate their participation. Moreover, the internationalisation of the situation in Afghanistan over the past decade means that many more parties now have a stake in the country’s affairs, thus it is no longer merely a matter of bringing together individuals, as had been the case in the 1990s. However, the growing recognition of the need to involve the Taliban in peace talks begins to make the Turkmen proposal seem a real possibility. In May 2011 a member of the Afghan High Peace Council described Turkmenistan as ‘one of the most promising’ locations for such meetings on account of its status of neutrality and its history of cordial relations with all the Afghan factions (Radio Free, 2011).

The Uzbek proposal also builds on its previous experience. The idea, as before, is to create a forum in which the external players that are most directly involved in Afghanistan can meet to discuss issues of concern, but the original format has been expanded to ‘Six plus Three’ to include NATO. The updated project was presented by President Karimov at the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008. The concept was well received but to date it has not progressed beyond the discussion stage. This is not surprising, because although it is a constructive and imaginative initiative, in its present form there is a lack clarity and definition.



One drawback is that the group, as currently envisaged, does not include Afghanistan. The reasoning is that the exclusion of official Afghan representation will provide flexibility, allowing different Afghan factions to be invited to take part in discussions as circumstances dictate. There is a logic in this argument. However, by contrast with the 1990s, there is now an internationally recognised Afghan government in place. To deny it representation implies that the present constitutional arrangements in Afghanistan are already moribund. This is a dubious assumption on which to base a diplomatic enterprise.

The second problem is tension between some members of the proposed entity. In particular, it is sometimes suggested that Iran and the United States would not agree sit at the same table. Certainly the Western-led coalition views Iran with suspicion and there are frequent accusations/allegations that Tehran is aiding the insurgency. Even so, at the 2006 NATO Summit in Riga, French President Jacques Chirac had called for Iran to be included in ‘contact group’ discussions on Afghanistan (Arnold, 2006). The proposal was not endorsed by other NATO members at that time, but four years later, the mood had changed. In October 2010, Tehran was for the first time officially represented at a meeting of the international contact group on Afghanistan (comprising EU, NATO, and numerous other states). As Richard Holbrooke, US special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan commented at a press briefing: ‘We recognise that Iran, with its long, almost completely open border with Afghanistan and with a huge drug problem ... has a role to play in the peaceful settlement of this situation in Afghanistan ... So for the United States there is no problem with their presence’ (*BBC Middle East*, 18 October 2010). In fact, this was merely a public acknowledgement of the informal, confidential contacts between the two states that were already taking place.

In the light of these developments, the ‘Six plus Three’ Group could provide a useful mechanism for deepening such a dialogue, but in order to do so it would have to engender an atmosphere of trust



and openness. Yet the initiative was compromised from the outset by the asymmetry of the proposed membership structure. The United States, in effect, would have double representation: in its own right and through its dominant role in NATO. In view of the extreme sensitivities in regional relations this could not but be regarded with suspicion. Thus it undermined the objective of providing a neutral forum for debate. The perceived bias in favour of the US cast doubt on Uzbekistan's role as an independent actor by creating the impression, however mistakenly, that it was acting as an agent for the projection of US influence.

Finally, the regional scope of the present 'Six plus Three' project is possibly too restrictive for the current situation. Today, a wide range of states are involved in Afghanistan and arguably, several are strong candidates for membership. India is the most obvious example. A near neighbour, it suffers from the same security threats as the border states. Moreover, as indicated above, it is one of the largest donors of aid to Afghanistan. The main argument against its inclusion is that Pakistan would object to it. Yet, as with the Iran-US relationship, this is a problem that needs to be resolved rather than avoided. Admittedly, Afghanistan is a particularly contentious issue for these two states, but that is all the more reason for both to be included. Moreover, India and Pakistan are already members of several other organisations, and both participate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. As for extra-regional players, there is no intrinsic reason why countries such as Japan – another major donor of aid to Afghanistan – should not be allowed to join. Criticisms such as these do not negate the value of a concept of a regional forum. Rather, they suggest that the thinking behind the 'Six plus Three' initiative is sound, but that it requires further refinement and consultation with partner states if it is to form the basis for a truly effective mechanism.



The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Afghanistan

The largest regional institution is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). As mentioned above, it was formally established in June 2001. Within less than a decade it developed a diversified institutional base as well as an extensive territorial outreach, spanning the Eurasian landmass from the Pacific to the Atlantic Oceans, from the Arctic to the Indian Oceans. As of June 2010, the SCO comprised six full Member States – China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – also Observer States (Mongolia, Iran, India and Pakistan) and Dialogue Partners (Belarus and Sri Lanka). It had concluded agreements on cooperation and partnership with several other regional groupings such as ASEAN, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Community. A gauge of the international standing of the SCO was the signing of the Joint Declaration on Cooperation between the UN and SCO Secretariats in April 2010.

The primary goal of the SCO is to improve regional security and stability. It espouses a holistic approach to these issues, setting ‘soft’ spheres of interaction such as culture and education on a par with security and defence. It also seeks to strengthen good neighbourly relations through diplomacy, confidence-building and economic cooperation. One of its aims is to promote the free flow of commodities, capital, technology, and services in the region. Operational responses to specific security threats, such as drug trafficking, organised crime and terrorist attacks, are the remit of the SCO’s Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), based in Tashkent.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s engagement with Afghanistan began in 2004, when President Karzai attended that year’s Summit meeting. The following year, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was created to provide a formal mechanism through which to channel the relationship. Nevertheless, Afghan engagement



with the SCO remained at a low level, in large part a reflection of US antipathy to this body. This began to change in March 2009, when a major SCO conference on Afghanistan was held in Moscow. Participants included the UN Secretary-General and senior representatives from the United States, European Union and other international bodies. The political significance of the event was that it gave formal recognition to the role of the SCO in Afghanistan. The practical outcome was the SCO-Afghanistan Action Plan on Combating Terrorism, Illicit Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime, which set out the tasks to be undertaken by the signatories. Importantly, the document stressed the SCO's willingness to cooperate with other international and regional bodies and specifically, it supported the extension of the ISAF mandate with regard to these issues.

In assessing the role that the SCO is likely to play in Afghanistan, it is important to bear in mind that one of its fundamental principles is non-interference in the internal affairs of any country. Thus, the SCO will take measures to combat terrorism and other criminal activities in Afghanistan, but will not assume an active role in conflict resolution. It does, however, have other benefits to offer. Firstly, it provides a forum within which relations with other regional powers can be cemented. Issues of common interest are discussed in plenary sessions, but also in private meetings on the margins of such gatherings. Thus, for example, the SCO cannot resolve the tangle of grievances between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but it does create additional channels of communication and cooperation, thereby exerting a discreetly mediating influence. Secondly, the SCO facilitates Afghanistan's re-integration into the regional economy. This is critical to the country's long-term development. In particular, it provides a framework for involving Afghanistan in the pan-continental infrastructural projects – roads, railways and pipelines – that are now taking shape. An indication of the Organisation's increasing importance for Afghanistan was Kabul's



decision to request Observer status in the SCO at the Astana Summit in June 2011.

Conclusions

The first and most important conclusion is that the 'neighbourhood' states are inextricably bound to Afghanistan and directly affected by developments there. However, the way in which they engage will be determined by national capabilities and priorities. There is no unified regional strategy, but there is multi-layered engagement, with different sets of members pursuing a variety of initiatives. The risk of duplication is largely offset by the sheer enormity of the tasks that need to be undertaken. Consequently, the emphasis is on building partnerships and seeking complementarity, rather than competition.

Taken as a whole, the pattern of overlapping activities reveals an implicit consensus on basic principles. There is general agreement that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. This does not mean that security threats will be ignored. On the contrary, the fight against terrorism, drug trafficking and other forms of organised crime is a priority for all the regional states, jointly and individually, and is being vigorously pursued. A third point of agreement is that Afghanistan's development must go hand in hand with regional re-integration. Infrastructural projects and projects to improve trade and transit links are the crucial underpinnings of such an endeavour and, as discussed above, a large number of initiatives are being implemented in this sphere. Restoring and strengthening cultural, educational and academic ties is also intrinsic to the realisation of the vision of regional re-integration. Resources are being devoted to such projects, but inevitably they are limited by security concerns as well as economic constraints. This will no doubt change as (and if) the regional states become more stable and prosperous.

The situation within Afghanistan is in flux and it is impossible to predict developments in the immediate future, let alone a few years ahead. The assassination of Osama Bin Laden by US special forces on



2 May 2011 opened up new uncertainties. To some, it seemed to offer a convenient opportunity to wind down the operation, especially as the exorbitant cost of the mission in Afghanistan would be difficult, if not impossible, for the US to sustain (estimated bill for the 2011 fiscal year was US\$113 billion) (Chandrasekaran, 2011). On the other hand, the military establishment was firmly opposed to a premature weakening of its counterinsurgency operations (Shanker, 2011). Thus, it was unclear how the issue would be resolved.

Moreover, as suggested above, it was not inconceivable that the United States, with or without NATO support, might find it expedient to retain a strategic foothold in the region. This would enable the US to continue to play a role in Eurasian power politics. By its very proximity it would exert pressure on states such as Iran, China and Russia, likewise on Pakistan. This would undoubtedly increase the potential for friction, if not conflict. It would also create a dilemma for the Central Asian states. To date, each of them has maintained a multi-vectored foreign policy, refusing to be drawn into exclusive security-political relationships. If there were to be an East-West standoff in the region, however, they might find it hard to remain unaligned. Thus, the promised NATO-ISAF draw down will be the end of a chapter, but surely not the end of geopolitical tensions in the region.

Notes

1. This paper is based on a longer presentation by the same author, entitled 'Regional Initiatives to Promote Stability and Development in Afghanistan', made at the NATO Advanced Research Workshop on NATO, the Fight against International Terrorism in Afghanistan and Security Situation in Central Asia since 9/11, held in Ankara, 8-9 April 2011.
2. Lord Paddy Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon, former High Representative in Bosnia, 'A victor's peace is impossible. Call for Iran's help', (Times, 22 November 2010).
3. Uzbek President Karimov first raised the Afghan issue at the 48th UN General Assembly in September 1993; he returned to this problem at international gatherings on several subsequent occasions. The other Central Asian presidents were similarly active in drawing attention to this issue.
4. For a full account of these negotiations (see Jahon Information Agency, 1999).
5. There is no reliable information on the size of the Turkmen population in Afghanistan, but it is estimated to be around 900,000. It includes members of the Ersary and other Turkmen tribes. There was some cross-border movement in the 20th century, but the majority have been settled in their present location for centuries.
6. The fifth and so-called 'permanent' round of Inter-Tajik Peace Talks took place in Ashgabat from 30 November 1995 to 21 July 1996 (Akiner, 2001: 55).
7. For a chronology of US-Uzbek military engagement see (Lumpe, 2010 (a): 6-14).
8. An interesting insight into the debates, perceptions and assumptions of leading Western experts in the immediate aftermath of these events is provided by the proceedings of the conference organized by the US National Intelligence Council, 'Afghanistan and Regional Geopolitical Dynamics after 11 September', 18-19 April 2002, Washington DC, www.dni.gov/nic/PDF_GIF.../afghanistan.pdf.
9. For a careful assessment of Iran's involvement in Afghanistan, see (Kagan, 2008: 37-56)
10. Personal communications by senior Uzbek diplomats in 2005 and later.
11. Personal communications by Kazakh and Uzbek officials and researchers in 2005. See also (Nichol, 29 March 2006).
12. The 2005 Astana Declaration is no longer displayed on the SCO website, but the document is available from the SCO Secretariat and the National Coordinators.
13. NATO website, Topic: Afghanistan [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_8189].



- htm].
14. This is of course difficult to judge, but recent surveys indicate that there is strong support for Afghan national identity in all parts of the country. See (International Council on Security and Development, November 2010).
 15. In March, the agreement between Russia and the US 'On the Transit of Arms, Military Hardware, Military Property and Personnel Through the Territory of the Russian Federation in Connection' was ratified [<http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/1874>]; a similar agreement was set in place with Kazakhstan in April [<http://en.rian.ru/world/20110414/163524449.html>].
 16. See, for example, (Starr, 2007). This was the first of a series of publications on this theme.
 17. See further (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007)
 18. See, for example, (Owen, 2010); also reports in *The Times*, such as M. Evans, 'Afghan recruits ... desert in droves', 24 August 2010, p. 25, and A. Loyd, 'Stoned and clueless', 22 October 2010, p. 43.
 19. It is impossible to know the reality of the situation on the ground, but this seems to be the perception in Afghanistan and in the wider region. See field survey results in (International Council on Security and Development, 2010).
 20. The incident was widely reported in the international press. (See, for example Haynes, 2010: 8).
 21. Lumpe, 2010 (a): 13; (see also, Lumpe, 2010 (b)), which gives a detailed breakdown of military aid allocations.
 22. For an insight into Uzbek thinking on the regional security environment, (see Karimova, 2010).
 23. In March 2011, Viktor Ivanov, head of the Russian Federal Drug Control Service, called for the UNODC mission in Afghanistan to be broadened [<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20110318/163074034.html>]. Russia, the largest donor to this mission, provided \$7 million in 2010.
 24. There have been several articles on this topic in the press in recent months. For example, (see Pincus, 2010).
 25. See further website of the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Afghanistan [<http://www.kazakhembus.com/index.php?page=commitment-to-assist-afghanistan>].
 26. For a description of ADB-supported projects between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan see ADB website [<http://www.adb.org/Documents/News/URM/urm-201002.asp?p=uzbmain>].
 27. For the text of President Karimov's Bucharest presentation see the Jahon News Agency website [http://www.jahonnews.uz/eng/sections/politics/address_by_president_of_the_republic_of_uzbekistan_he_mr_islam_karimov.mgr].
 28. Private communications to the author by senior US and Iranian officials in October 2010.
 29. For an analysis of the structure, policy and activities of the SCO see (Akiner, 2010).
 30. Declaration of the special Conference on Afghanistan convened under the auspices of the



- Shanghai Cooperation Organization [<http://www.sectSCO.org/EN/show.asp?id=98>].
31. Plan of Action of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Member States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Combating Terrorism, Illicit Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime [<http://www.sectSCO.org/EN/2009.asp>].
32. (RIA Novosti report, 2011). No decision on the application was taken at this meeting.

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