

NOREF Policy Brief

Afghanistan and the regional powers: history *not* repeating itself?

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Executive summary

This brief surveys Afghanistan's links to four key regional powers: India, Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia. It finds that regional affairs have changed significantly from the troubled 1980s and 1990s. Whereas Afghanistan's neighbours previously backed competing Afghan factions and played out their regional rivalries in the Afghan arena, many have now shifted to working with a functioning central Afghan government (Pakistan remains to some extent, however, a worrying exception). Strong regional competition persists among key adversaries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and between Pakistan and India, but these rivalries are less subversive for Afghanistan than they were previously.

The policy implications are that the quest for a grand regional settlement in which major inter-state grievances are addressed seems both futile and less urgent. The on-going Istanbul process provides an alternative step-by-step approach that emphasises regional confidence building. Norway should continue its support to this process and, if called upon by the regional powers, use its financial muscle to help ensure that tangible cooperation projects are initiated as part of it.

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Introduction

In late 2011 and the first half of 2012, Afghanistan and its neighbours have convened at four major forums under the auspices of the Istanbul process. Dialogue more than substance may be the defining feature of these sessions so far. Nevertheless, they serve as an indication that regional affairs have changed significantly from the troubled 1980s and 1990s. Whereas Afghanistan's neighbours previously backed competing Afghan factions and played out their regional rivalries in the Afghan arena, many have now shifted to working with a functioning central Afghan government. Strong regional competition persists among key adversaries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and between Pakistan and India, but these rivalries are less subversive for Afghanistan than they were previously.

The policy implication of these trends is that the quest for a grand regional settlement whereby major inter-state grievances are assessed seems both futile and less urgent. The Istanbul process provides an alternative step-by-step approach that emphasises confidence building. Still, it remains the case that the immediate insecurities of Iran and, in particular, Pakistan, are proving harmful for Afghanistan's stabilisation process. These distinct and vexing insecurities continue to warrant special attention in regional diplomatic efforts. Norway's contribution, however, should be linked to the Istanbul process. As will be argued at the end of this brief, Norway should support the confidence-building initiatives that form part of the process and also help Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs become a more forceful actor in regional consensus building.

NATO pullout: chaos or muddling through?

Afghanistan faces two crucial challenges in the next two-year period. The international military forces will pull back and hand over security to the Afghan national army, and a new president will be elected when Hamid Karzai steps down in 2014. In the wake of the previous large-scale pullout from Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in

1989, competition and disagreements within the resistance movement (*mujahideen*) triggered a violent civil war.

Roderic Braithwaite is among those who caution that there is a real danger that a pullout will result in chaos: the NATO military forces may be as unsuccessful as the Soviet army.¹ By contrast, the contributors to the Adelphi paper *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond* are cautiously optimistic. They hold that the country will 'not rapidly return to a civil war'.² Their optimism is informed by the finding that '[a]ll but one [Pakistan] of the neighboring states support the central government, rather than their traditional client groups'.³ Moreover, they find that the central Afghan government, despite its weakness and shortcomings, is able to leverage the relationships with the regional powers to its advantage.⁴

India: a Northern Alliance supporter turns to institution building

India and Afghanistan shared similar political outlooks in the late 1970s. The political leadership in both countries sympathised with socialist ideas and cooperated with the Soviet Union. Indira Gandhi visited Afghanistan in 1976 during the reign of President Sardar Muhammad Daud. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 caused unease in India, but the country nevertheless sided with the Soviet Union and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). It continued its support for the Soviet-backed government of Mohammad Najibullah in the years 1989–1992. As Afghanistan slid further into civil war in 1992, India reached out to the new government formed by Burhanuddin Rabbani. India increased this support after the Taliban overthrow of the Rabbani government in 1996. Rabbani's political faction Jamiat-e Islami became one of the core groups in the Northern

1 Rodric Braithwaite, "Afghanistan: the lessons of history?", *Political Insight*, December 2011.

2 Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, "Introduction", in *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, Adelphi Series 51: 425–426, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 12.

3 Adam Ward, Nicholas Redman and Toby Dodge, "Conclusion", in *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, p. 254.

4 Ward, Redman and Dodge, p. 264.

Alliance, which consisted mainly of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara factions. Ahmed Shah Massoud, also of Jamiat-e Islami, led the Northern Alliance militarily. Allegedly, India supplied the Northern Alliance with high-altitude warfare equipment, assisted with military advisers and provided medical support.⁵ India saw the rise of the Taliban as a major security threat. The Taliban had an explicitly pro-Pakistan foreign policy agenda and expressed tough anti-Indian statements on the conflict in Kashmir. India believed that the training of militants in Taliban-held Afghanistan included Kashmiris, alongside Pakistani and other foreign militants.⁶

The NATO invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 defeated the Taliban and propelled members of the Northern Alliance into power. India has since pledged support valued at well over USD 2 billion to Afghanistan in the past decade, much of it devoted to infrastructure (roads, power) and government capacity building.⁷ The road construction connects Afghanistan better to Iran and the Iranian port Chahbahar, which also serves as a hub for Indian exports to Iran and Central Asia. As part of its capacity-building efforts, India has, among other initiatives, provided over 600 long-term university scholarships to Afghan students and over 600 short-term training scholarships to Afghan government service employees. It supports the development of major national institutions in a range of spheres, including media, health, elections and local government.

Bilateral relations are currently close and cooperative. The two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement in October 2011 at a ceremony in New Delhi where the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, stressed that India would 'stand by Afghanistan' when the foreign troops withdrew.⁸

Iran: promoter of Shia community turns to President Karzai

Economic cooperation and cultural links between Afghanistan and Iran during the reign of the Shah in Iran were considerable. After the Soviet invasion Iran's role became more limited. The new Shiite revolutionary regime condemned the Soviet invasion and supported the relatively minor guerrilla groups linked to the Shia Hazara minority.⁹ Iran made considerable attempts at forging a unity among a range of different political leaders and military groups in the ethnic Hazara community in the late 1980s, although it does not seem to have been instrumental in the eventual formation of the major Hazara party Hizb e-Wahdat in 1989.¹⁰ During the civil war years in the 1990s, Iran provided substantial contributions to Hizb e-Wahdat, and this assistance continued when the faction joined the Northern Alliance. Iran, like India, was deeply suspicious of the Taliban's close ties to Pakistan. This, alongside concern for the hard-pressed Hazara community, provided a strong motivation for the Northern Alliance support. Iran's engagement became particularly evident in 1998 when 10 Iranian diplomats at the Iranian council were killed after the fall of the Northern Alliance stronghold Mazar-e-Sharif. Iran amassed troops on the Iranian-Afghan borders in response, but did not launch a military attack. Instead it continued its close cooperation with Russia and India in propping up the Northern Alliance.

Iran engaged in the political affairs of Afghanistan in the immediate period after the Taliban fell. It cooperated with the United States and others in handling the immediate challenges of transition, and Iran participated actively at the Bonn conference where the post-war political road map was agreed. Iran has since been an important promoter and supporter of President Hamid Karzai; this support has included regular shipments of hard cash to President Karzai personally.¹¹ Iran has been a major recipient

5 Fahmida Ashraf, "India-Afghanistan relations after 9/11", *Strategic Studies*, vol. 27, Summer 2007.

6 Ibid.

7 Ministry of External Affairs, "India-Afghanistan relations", New Delhi, January 2011.

8 BBC, "Afghanistan and India sign 'strategic partnership'", October 4th 2011 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-15161776>); BBC, "India's growing stake in Afghanistan", June 28th 2012. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18622573>).

9 Fred Halliday, "Iran and Afghanistan: the limits of power", Noref brief, 2009.

10 Ibrahim Naimatullah, "The dissipation of political capital among Afghanistan's Hazaras 2001-2009", Crisis States working paper 51, London, LSE Crisis States Research Centre, 2009.

11 Emile Hokayem, "Iran", in *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*.

of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan and, while it has made repeated attempts at repatriating these, remittances from Afghans in Iran amount to USD 500 million per year.¹² Iran is also an important trading partner, and Iran's transport infrastructure and ports are important for Afghan exports. The western cities and provinces of Afghanistan, Herat in particular, are strongly influenced economically and politically by Iran, and their relative prosperity can in large part be attributed to their proximity to its neighbour.

In addition to these, no doubt, positive contributions, signs of a double game by Iran have also surfaced in recent years. Sources in the United States claim that Iran has supplied weapons to groups associated with the Taliban.¹³ The logic behind Iran's actions, if this is true, could be linked to the possibility that the United States and its allies may retaliate militarily if Iran continues its nuclear programme. By supporting anti-U.S. groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Iran can threaten further chaos in Afghanistan. This increases the potential costs associated with military action on Iran for the United States.

Notwithstanding these potential subversive actions, Iran's current relationship with Afghanistan is, above all, marked by a good dialogue with President Karzai, who also seems responsive to Iranian needs. The shift in President Karzai's rhetoric to a markedly more anti-U.S. stance also fits conveniently with Iran's outlook on regional affairs.

Russia: troubled past causes restraint

The Soviet Union cooperated with Afghanistan in the 1970s and became further entangled in the political affairs of Afghanistan when the Marxist–Leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in a coup in 1978. Communist rule, however, triggered popular resistance and the PDPA was weakened by a fierce internal struggle. The Soviet leadership

had doubts whether a military campaign was advisable, but nevertheless intervened in 1979 to support the PDPA. A Marxist revolution could not be seen to fail and it was important to preserve Afghanistan as a friendly buffer state along the Soviet Union's border.¹⁴ The Soviet invasion was, however, unable to quell resistance to communist rule. After a near decade-long unsuccessful military campaign it installed a Soviet-friendly government with Mohammad Najibullah at its head and departed in 1989. It equipped the Najibullah government with a massive supply of weapons, but economic and military support eroded after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

Russia is, nevertheless, likely to have observed the developments during Afghanistan's civil war years closely, not least because it was heavily involved in the civil war in neighbouring Tajikistan (1992–1997).¹⁵ It may also have been the case that the Taliban advance in 1996 triggered both Iran and Russia to push their Tajik clients to negotiate a peace settlement in that country. Peace in Tajikistan helped guard Russia and the former Soviet republics in Central Asia against the spread of radical Islam across Central Asia. Moreover, a more stable Tajikistan created a safe haven for the Northern Alliance and they used it as a supply hub and area of rest and recuperation when fighting the Taliban in the years leading up to 2001.

Russia's engagement with Afghanistan in the early years after 2001 was marked by absence and restraint. As the situation worsened for the NATO forces in the later part of the decade, Russia became more involved, making a major contribution with the establishment of the vital NATO supply route through Russia and Central Asia (Northern Distribution Network). Russia has also donated AK-47 rifles to Afghan security forces and trained 250 Afghan police officers in Moscow.¹⁶ Russia is a major destination country for Afghan heroin and the country is making additional and tangible efforts to help reduce the

12 UN News Centre, "Afghan remittances from Iran total 500 million USD annually says UN report", December 7th 2008 (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=29218&Cr=afghan&Cr1=#.UE9UfBhuppK>).

13 Emile Hokayem, "Iran".

14 Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics*, New York, HarperCollins, 2002, pp. 196–205.

15 Stina Torjesen, Christina Wille and S. Neil MacFarlane, "Tajikistan's road to stability: the reduction in small arms proliferation and remaining challenges", Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper no. 17, Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2005.

16 *Christian Science Monitor*, "Karzai visits Moscow as Russia eyes greater role in Afghanistan", January 20th 2011, Russian; RFE/RL, "Russian, Afghan presidents open door to cooperation during rare state visit", January 21st 2011.

production and export of drugs from Afghanistan.¹⁷ Russia's support for Afghanistan, like that of Iran and India, evolved after 2001 from one directed towards the Northern Alliance to one favouring the Afghan government and President Karzai. However, while President Karzai made a number of visits to Iran and India after 2001, it was only in 2011 that he first visited Moscow.¹⁸ The political leadership in Russia and in Afghanistan seem tacitly to agree that cooperation is best held at a moderate level given that Russian support to Afghanistan evokes painful memories and political controversy in both countries.

Saudi Arabia: from public to private financing of the Taliban

Saudi Arabia has traditionally been associated with Afghan groups that have been far removed from Iran, India and Russia. Saudi Arabia contributed small amounts of official aid to Afghanistan already during the reign of Daud in the 1970s and became a major financial contributor to Afghan factions fighting the Soviet Union and PDAP in the 1980s.¹⁹ Saudi Arabia was concerned at the anti-religious and communist agenda that the Soviet Union had for Afghanistan and the Middle East. It cooperated closely with the United States and Pakistan in supporting a number of largely Sunni and Pashtun resistance groups during the Soviet occupation.²⁰ As Afghanistan descended into civil war Saudi Arabia followed Pakistan's lead in backing the Taliban movement. When the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996, Saudi Arabia was one of only three states to recognise the new regime.²¹ However, the Taliban's close cooperation with, and protection of, al-Qaeda in the late 1990s was a serious concern for Saudi Arabia, as the organisation had regime change in that country as a key policy aim. Allegedly, Saudi Arabia demanded that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden, but the Taliban refused.²²

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Saudi Arabia shifted its support to the central government. Emil Hokayem notes Saudi Arabia's anger at the refusal to hand over bin Laden as one reason for this shift.²³ President Karzai has called on Saudi Arabia's mediation and support on several occasions when attempting to negotiate (unsuccessfully) with the Taleban. This has been interpreted as a sign that, while Saudi Arabia may be able to establish a dialogue with anti-government groups, it has little leverage over them.

Currently, Saudi Arabia maintains a good dialogue with President Karzai and it is also a major aid donor to Afghanistan. In recent years Saudi Arabia has made aid pledges amounting to well over USD 350 million.²⁴ The shift on the part of Saudi Arabia away from supporting sub-state actors towards the central government is a significant one. However, Taliban-affiliated groups continue to enjoy support from private donors in the Gulf region.²⁵

Conclusion

The above assessment demonstrates that all four regional powers have changed their mode of engagement with Afghanistan from the 1980s and 1990s. As the Adelphi paper so rightly indicates, all four powers now work primarily with the central government and offer tangible support to it. There is, however, significant variation in how the states do this. On the one end of the spectrum, India invests heavily in institution building and offers financial and technical assistance to the Afghan government. On the other end, Iran offers considerable support, but a significant share of this is informal and has been directed to President Karzai personally. Iran is also relatively more engaged in the western provinces and this bolsters institutions at the sub-state, rather than the national, level. Saudi Arabia, can be placed somewhere in between Iran and India, with an emphasis on formal financial support that is directed primarily to the central Afghan government. Russia engages on selective issues

17 UNODC, "Press release: UNODC, Japan and Russia launch joint project to assist Afghanistan in tackling drug trafficking", June 18th 2012.

18 *Christian Science Monitor*, "Karzai visits Moscow"; RFE/RL, "Russian, Afghan presidents".

19 Ewans, pp. 214–217.

20 Ibid.

21 Emile Hokayem "Saudi Arabia", in *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, pp. 247–248.

22 Ibid. p. 248.

23 Ibid.

24 Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia (Washington, DC), "Saudi Arabia pledges \$150 million in aid for Afghanistan", January 28th 2010.

25 Anne Stenersen, "The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan: organization leadership and worldview", FFI report 359, 2010.

such as transport and drugs, but its role is more withdrawn and restrained than those of the three others.

This shift indicates that the era of proxy wars fought out in the Afghan theatre may be over. The United States and Russia do not back opposing allies as they did during the Cold War. While the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia continues in the region, it does not seem to result in the competitive backing of armed sub-state factions within Afghanistan as it did in the 1990s. India and Pakistan acted out their mutual hostility in the Afghan arena in the 1980s and 1990s, and have continued to do so after 2001. There is a key difference, though, in the way Pakistan and India engage in Afghanistan. The support that stems from Pakistani institutions is primarily geared towards security, intelligence sharing and provision of safe havens for selected militant groups. Importantly, there is continuing uncertainty whether this support is endorsed by the central leadership in the security institutions, or whether it can be attributed to the fragmented nature of the Pakistani state (the top political leadership in Pakistan is pragmatically supporting and engaging in the Istanbul process). India's support is, in any case, of a different kind: it is a mix of security and development aid to the central government, much of it can be traced through publicly available sources and the support has considerable emphasis on institution building.

These trends make for a more benign regional environment than was the case in the 1990s. China's growing power may also, in the years ahead, turn out to be a stabilising factor. China has substantial economic and political cooperation with Afghanistan as well as with all of Afghanistan's neighbours except India.²⁶ Two major challenges persist, though: first, the continued animosity between Pakistan and India, and, second, the insecurity associated with Iran's nuclear programme and the potential reactions to it. Both Pakistan and Iran face threats that they perceive as existential. The more there is perceived pressure – from India in the case of Pakistan and from the United States in the case of Iran – the more likely it will be that the two countries will increase their backing of

armed groups operating in Afghanistan. This may, needless to say, contribute to destabilisation in Afghanistan.

Indeed, there are no guarantees that the comparatively benign regional relations will last. Here, Afghan actors themselves play a key part. It remains to be seen whether key political factions will reach out to old regional backers if they become frustrated with the course of Afghan politics. It is, likewise, difficult to foresee whether regional powers will respond to such invitations and unleash new proxy wars in which regional rivalries once again mesh with domestic Afghan conflicts.

The shift on the part of the regional powers towards primarily supporting the Afghan government is, however, promising. President Karzai has excelled at reaching out and building trust with all major regional players, except Pakistan. The outreach to these key powers may be one of President Karzai's key achievements. In a best-case scenario Afghanistan will start to resemble its northern neighbours in Central Asia; for years these countries have taken advantage of the competition for influence in the region among powers such as Russia, the United States and China. They have played the powers off against each other and extracted larger sums of financial and technical assistance than they might have got otherwise. In order to adopt these strategies Afghanistan must maintain a coherent central government that can uphold a convincing and substantial dialogue with all interested powers. Given the fractured nature of Afghan politics, this will obviously be no easy task, and the first test in this matter comes in 2014 when President Karzai steps down.

Norway's role

Norway is in the process of withdrawing the military troops it has contributed to the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, but pledges to maintain its sizable development assistance at similar levels to before. In the years 2008–2012 this has been over NOK 750 million annually (USD 122 million) and this level of support is set to continue in the period 2013–2017.

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion of China's role in Afghanistan and the greater region see Stina Torjesen, "Fixing Afghanistan: what role for China?", Noref brief, June 22nd 2010.

Norway has emphasised the importance of a secure regional environment for Afghanistan and has supported and participated in the Istanbul process – indeed it has been a key diplomatic and financial force behind the informal consultations that led up to it.²⁷ At the Kabul Ministerial Conference on the Istanbul Process in June 2012, the participants agreed to continue the regional dialogue, institutionalise the Istanbul process and push ahead with tangible ‘Confidence Building Measures’.²⁸ Norway has so far signed up as a supporter of one of these, the Disaster Management Confidence Building Measure, but may well offer additional support to other initiatives if called upon by the regional states. Education and regional infrastructure will be likely areas to support if so.

The Istanbul process clearly distinguishes between two layers of participants: the countries within the region on the one hand and supporting organisations and countries with an interest in the region on the other. Norway emphasises the importance of regional ownership and deliberately waits for the regional states to take the lead in pushing the process forward. This careful approach seems wise in a region where countries such as Iran, Russia, China and Pakistan are sensitive to ‘Western’-backed initiatives.

It is primarily as a mentor for Afghan diplomats and financier that Norway can inspire positive regional action. The Istanbul process provides a good framework for this. This process is now at a crucial juncture where lofty pledges must be turned into tangible initiatives. Norway should continue to balance an eagerness to support and promote the Istanbul process, with restraint and allowing for regional ownership to take root.

Further reading

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Marco Mezzera, “The nature of a friendship: making sense of Sino-Pakistan relations”, Noref policy brief, September 2011, <http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Asia/Pakistan/Publications/The-nature-of-a-friendship-making-sense-of-Sino-Pakistani-relations/%28language%29/eng-US>.

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, “Pakistan”, in *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, Adelphi Series 51: 425–426, London, Routledge, 2011, <http://www.iiss.org/publications/adelphi-papers/adelphis-2011/afghanistan-to-2015-and-beyond/>.

27 “Conference Declaration, Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Stable Afghanistan”, Istanbul, November 2nd 2011 (<http://www.mfa.gov.tr/istanbul-process-on-regional-security-and-cooperation-for-a-secure-and-stable-afghanistan.en.mfa>); Naimatullah Ibrahim, “Guest blog: the heart of Asia hardly beating at the second ‘Heart of Asia’ meeting”, Afghanistan Analyst Network, June 22nd 2012.

28 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan et al., “Conference Declaration, Kabul Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process”, June 14th 2012 (<http://www.mfa.gov.tr/declaration-of-the-kabul-ministerial-conference-of-the-istanbul-process-14-june-2012.en.mfa>).