

Chair's Summary



LIECHTENSTEIN INSTITUTE
ON SELF-DETERMINATION
AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Crisis Diplomacy from the Mediterranean to the Hindu Kush

The Liechtenstein Institute on Self Determination at Princeton University convened a special Colloquium, “Diplomacy from the Mediterranean to the Hindu Kush: A Holistic and Proactive Approach” in Triesenberg, Principality of Liechtenstein, April 19-22, 2012. The colloquium brought together over seventy participants, including senior representatives, experts, academics, and civil society representatives from Austria, Azerbaijan, the European Union, Germany, Georgia, France, Iran, Israel, Liechtenstein, Russia, Qatar, Switzerland, Syria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Participants engaged in both plenary and working group discussions about ways to address the four key issues: crisis diplomacy with Iran; the ongoing crisis in Syria; Afghanistan in transition; and preventing the escalation of crises in this macro region. This was the third LISD-sponsored colloquium on developments in the Mediterranean to Hindu Kush region since the Arab Spring. The colloquium was off the record according to Liechtenstein Colloquium rules, and was financially supported by LISD, The House of Liechtenstein, the Government of the Principality of Liechtenstein, and the SIBIL Stiftung in Vaduz. The Colloquium was chaired by Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, Director of LISD. This chair's summary includes an updated postscript.

BACKGROUND

The overarching theme of the colloquium was the complex and interrelated nature of three simultaneous crises in Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan. As international diplomatic history demonstrates, seemingly independent crises that evolve in a geographically confined space over a period of time have a propensity for mutual interaction, reinforcement, and intensification. In a strategically important region already in upheaval and flux, such devel-

opments could clearly influence the international system and attract the intervention of neighboring and outside powers that might exploit the crises for the advancement of their respective interests. Great power interests can have the potential to aggravate the ramifications of such crises and to challenge regional and international crisis management capabilities and efficiency. The state of the international relations framework (domestic problems of key actors) further affects crisis development, and stabilization efforts.

The colloquium analyzed the crises and region according to the established Liechtenstein Colloquium “three factors plus one” framework for analysis: time, costs, stakes, plus perception. An in-depth crisis simulation directed special attention to unintended consequences, wild cards, and inadvertent chain reactions associated with particular policy options. A *downward spiral syndrome* can further intensify and heighten the complexity of such crises, dragging the entire region—including those outside actors involved therein—into a negative trajectory that renders crisis management and amelioration all the more difficult. As time passes, the intensity of the crisis grows, stakes are rising, human suffering and costs compound, necessitating ever more drastic efforts at stabilization.

THE MACRO REGION

SYRIA, IRAN, AFGHANISTAN: HEIGHTENED SECURITY CONCERNS IN THE NEAR FUTURE

The longer upheaval and civil unrest within a state continue, the greater the violence and bloodshed, the more difficult post-crisis reconciliation and reintegration between the parties involved become, and the higher the



Source: Google Maps

risk of engagement at the behest of parties in neighboring states and other outside powers. This is dramatically enhanced in cases of sectarian differences between parties, where the social contract uniting the country threatens to evaporate and new states begin to emerge. Historical examples, such as the violent break-up of post-Cold War Yugoslavia and the continuation of problems in the post-Dayton world, are as ominous as the situation in and with Iran post-1979, and in Lebanon since the 1980s.

Causal and contributing factors in these crises include factional identity, religious fundamentalism, rampant nationalism, socio-economic grievances; leadership crisis, and vast dichotomies between local, national, regional, and international realities potentially bursting out in violence, civil war, and even leading to separation. Additional issues within the macro region include the nearly eternal problem of the three monotheist religions in the

Middle East, an increasing problem of intra-religious tensions (namely Sunni-Shia); geostrategic uniqueness in the strategic neighborhood, which attracts huge outside power interest and competition; the pressure on the socio-economic structure through a youth bulge that has created mass under- and unemployment, and despair; and the oil and gas wealth in the region which remains a key issue, as such resources still comprise the energy lifeline for much of the industrialized world. The Iranian crisis adds the critical issues of support of terrorism, nuclear aspirations, and regional competition, including a possible nuclear arms race.

The region also has geopolitically-precarious pressure points, including the Bosphorus which serves as the gateway to the Black Sea, South Caucasus, and Caspian Sea; the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz; and the Suez Canal.

CASE STUDIES

IRAN

Iran has historically played a significant geopolitical role in the region. The macro region has seen Iranian influence and interest for the last two-and-one-half millennia since the days of the Achaemenids who, after liberating the Jews from Babylonian captivity, reinstated their kingdom. The Sassanian Empire fought with Rome for control of the Middle East until the early seventh century, when both powers annihilated each other's militaries and economies in unprecedented campaigns. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Ilkhans revitalized the very name of Iran and laid claim again to the land up to the Mediterranean shores. The Islamic Republic believes it has a legitimate right in contributing to regional decision making, and rejects any attempts to contain or isolate it from the rest of the greater Middle East. The United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and others in the international community are concerned with Iran's revolutionary identity, nuclear ambitions, and expected role in the region and beyond.

The trust deficit between the United States and Iran remains the most significant hurdle to progress on both the nuclear issue and bilateral reconciliation. Despite the urgent need to move forward and make progress on these issues, the two camps remain constrained by the bounds of historical experiences and national narratives. Renewed bilateral dialogue could play an important role in rebuilding trust and reversing decades of misunderstanding. In many ways, the nuclear impasse manifests a deeper distrust between the United States and Iran—recently emphasized in the American presidential election campaign. The Islamic Republic views the crisis over its (supposedly civilian) nuclear program as another attempt by the United States and its allies to dominate Iran and deprive it of its legitimate national rights. Despite the Obama administration's outreach, Iran is convinced that the goal of the United States' policy towards Iran remains regime change. The United States, in contrast, questions the strategic rationale behind Iran's nuclear program and its broader intentions

in the region. The United States believes that Iran has not accepted responsibility for its actions or addressed the P5+1's concerns with its nuclear program, enrichment, and its potential to develop nuclear weapons. The focus on a possible Iranian nuclear device often ignores the reality that Iran maintains a large arsenal of chemical WMDs.

The escalating tension between the United States and Iran is not constrained to the bilateral relationship. Today, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon, and other countries in the region serve as related conflict zones in an increasingly dangerous "new Cold War" between Iran and its allies against Israel, the United States, and its allies. This plus the hype and the looming threat of a military strike by Israel against Iran significantly increases the possibility of regional instability.

SYRIA

The current state of conflict, its escalation, and increasing involvement of the neighborhood is putting the Syrian people, and the security and stability of the neighborhood and macro region, at serious risk. We are witnessing a rapid deterioration of the security situation within Syria and increasing effects—in large part due to refugees—on Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. At the time of writing, since the upheaval began in March 2011, more than 22,000 people have died, more than 350,000 have been injured, and nearly 1.5 million people have been internally displaced. More than 220,000 have

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found shelter in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. The fighting—with concomitant casualties averaging more than 80 per day—has increased dramatically as of late. It is clear that the ceasefire proposed by the international mediator Kofi Annan in the spring of 2012 had no effect. Some argue that Syria has become engulfed in a civil war. Many today see the stepping down of President Bashar al-Assad as the only solution, although this possibility still remains very much in question, as the Syrian opposition remains disjointed and he seems to want to fight to the end. Some argue for international military intervention in Syria to protect civilians, while others strongly reject any foreign military intervention in their country. Powers like Russia and China remain seriously opposed to any outside intervention or regime change. While the option of a no-fly zone could help establish buffer zones and shift the balance of power away from the Assad regime, the potential retaliatory capacity by Assad's forces could turn what began as an intervention based on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) into a protracted hot conflict with potential deployment of chemical weapons. The internal conflict may thus continue for a long time without a decisive cataclysmic event.

Various means of pressuring Assad to step aside may be available. Such policy options that might affect the Assad regime's calculation of political longevity include reaching out to Syrian partners such as Russia and Iran to broker an understanding, or even the threat of foreign military force. There has been debate as to whether the Assad regime should be involved in the current political dialogue on the future of Syria during the spring of 2012. It is clear that Assad encourages division among components of the opposition. The plan of Kofi Annan exists as the only available framework that still has the support of many in the international community. While extremely necessary, and a condition *sine qua non*, the implementation of a ceasefire has not worked. Hence the situation still does not allow for urgently-needed humanitarian aid. The United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) has proven to be unable to perform its tasks. Escalating tensions with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Syria's neighbors—Turkey and Lebanon—increase the risk of

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regional conflict. Israel has, thus far, not considered any intervention, as it is content with stability on the Golan, but the control of Syrian chemical weapons is a critical issue. Russia and Iran continue their support of the Assad regime; Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are backing the rebels as increasingly do other Western states.

AFGHANISTAN

Regarding the case of Afghanistan, participants in the 2012 Liechtenstein Colloquium predicted that the May 2009 surge in military support and failure to recognize the legitimacy of Afghanistan's political leadership would result in an intensification of the violence. Sadly this prediction has come true. Instability has in fact escalated without an adequate surge in civilian and institutional capacities.

The years 2015-2024 will bring a decade of transformation, during which the international community has promised to meet the expenses for sustaining a significant Afghan National Army and Police to the tune of \$4.1 billion per annum, and to support the development of civilian institutions with \$16 billion in aid. With this move toward de facto Afghan sovereignty, the international community must also take into account the effects of the economic recession and subsequent decrease in foreign presence and financial aid on Afghan troops during this transition. Resources provided by the more remote international friends of Afghanistan will start to decline in relative importance compared to those mobilized by its more proximate neighbors, especially Pakistan, Iran, India, and Russia. Participants at the colloquium expect that the growth of Afghan-owned businesses in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states might deal a stronger hand to the expatriate communi-

ty. The decade-long investment in Afghan development has created thousands of fortunes.

The formal process of empowering Afghan forces as the sole security actor in the country has resulted in 75 percent of the population currently living in the areas undergoing transition. Much Afghan territory is under the “control” of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Currently, many security operations are conducted under ANSF leadership with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mainly in a support role. The transition to complete Afghan sovereignty is conditional and will take place in stages through 2013-2014. As Afghanistan takes the lead in military and police operations, the United States and its allies will attempt to continue to maintain their involvement in training, backup, and special operations. However, this promise for the 2015-2024 decade of transformation remains contingent upon an ongoing series of agreements on the status of US forces and other ISAF members.

Any discussion of progress toward peace in Afghanistan also focuses on political reforms because of the critical role that elections have played, and will continue to play in the approach to 2014. Unfortunately, there is a general understanding that elections in almost half of the Pashtun-settled areas will either not take place due to security concerns, or result in massive fraud and voter disenfranchisement at the hands of those who provide security. As mentioned in the earlier Liechtenstein Col-

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loquium, it is likely that the elections will again require two rounds of voting, as no single candidate is likely to win over 50 percent in the first round. Moreover, elections have historically served a polarizing—and even temporarily destabilizing—role in multi-ethnic and post-conflict settings.

The consensus in Afghan society to pursue a peaceful settlement between the government and Taliban forces has survived the assassinations of several leaders. As the groundwork for a political process in Afghanistan is built—the creation of a High Peace Council in 2010, the splitting of the Taliban list by the UN Security Council in 2011, and the establishment of a Taliban political office in Qatar in 2012—the key problem remains the Taliban movement and other insurgents. The Afghan government and the international community have shown themselves capable and willing to address the demands of such insurgent groups (including the release of prisoners, removal from the UN al-Qaeda sanctions list, and a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces), and have dropped previous preconditions, which now form part of a necessary outcome of the peace process. Pragmatists and utopians within the Taliban movement and other insurgent elements remain at odds with each other on which course to take.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy recommendations generated by colloquium participants are meant for international and regional decision makers. They represent ideas put forth by the colloquium’s plenary and break out discussions.

IRAN

- *Publish* in full Supreme Leader Khamenei’s *fatwa* against the production or use of nuclear weapons, as well as other public statements forbidding the use of weapons of mass destruction. The key question for future progress is how to “operationalize”

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the fatwa in order to ease the concerns of the EU3+3 and other parties over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

- *Understand* that the nuclear crisis is, at its core, a manifestation of the historic distrust between Iran and the United States and Israel. While the urgency of the nuclear issue warrants immediate attention, the parties will need to address broader issues of bilateral reconciliation in order to truly resolve the diplomatic crisis. A comprehensive political agreement between the EU+3 and Iran, in addition to a technical agreement, is vital.
- *Consider* confidence building measures such as a freeze of Iran's 20 percent enrichment and a fuel exchange for the Tehran Research Reactor in return for the P5+1's recognition of Iran's right to enrich at the 5 percent level. Iran could also accept the maximum level of transparency and verification requested by the IAEA and all necessary confidence building measures assuring the international community that its nuclear program will remain peaceful forever in return for the P5+1 lifting the sanctions gradually. Progress on the nuclear issue could be accompanied by non-nuclear confidence building measures between the United States and Iran, including bilateral dialogue on shared interests in Afghanistan.
- *Consider* the policy proposals of a WMD-free Middle East seriously, in which Israel and Iran would agree in concert with other countries in the region. Because Israel and Iran do not have bilateral ties, such a multilateral effort would be critical in moving past the diplomatic impasse between

these two nations.

- *Take* advantage of the opportunities in the Istanbul EU3+3 where both sides agreed to work for a solution within the framework of a step-by-step plan under NPT and based on proportionate reciprocity. Time is of critical importance and, to avert future confrontation, the parties should demonstrate goodwill and articulate their intentions of seizing this window of opportunity. All parties should acknowledge that the history of this issue is filled with similar missed opportunities for progress.
- *Welcome* technically-oriented solutions espoused by Iran and the IAEA, as well as the collective confidence building measures offered by the EU3+3, to fill the remaining political trust deficit within the NPT framework agreed upon in Istanbul.
- *Reconcile* the United States' policy of engagement with the Iranian perception of continued interest in regime change. Though the United States denies this, if it is so it would prevent the United States from faithfully engaging Iran, and Iran from fully accepting the United States' attempts at outreach.
- *Establish* authorized channels through the United Nations between Iran and the US for addressing the threat posed by al-Qaeda, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the production and trafficking of narcotics in the region.
- *Include* Iran in Contact Group/Core Group meetings on the situation in Afghanistan and in Iraq and Syria.

SYRIA

- *Consider and continue* the Annan Plan as a strong starting point for a potential political solution to the crisis in Syria. While there is reason to be skeptical about the ultimate success of the Annan plan, it is a positive step towards the development of a

framework.

- *Understand* that there are two general approaches to implementing the Annan plan. The first approach is a sequential process, in which actors inside Syria would only agree to one phase at a time with little or no guarantees as to what would come next. The second approach is more comprehensive. Under this approach, actors would agree to a larger plan, which would include several phases, and may also deal with issues of Syria's future and possibly a regime transition. The two approaches offer different advantages and disadvantages. Stakeholders are more likely to buy into the process if they feel their interests are addressed in a comprehensive plan. However, it is more difficult to agree on the details of a comprehensive plan. Moreover, the prospect of sectarian strife, including revenge killings, must be considered in the event that such a political process fails to deliver results.
- *Begin* any resolution of the conflict with a complete cease fire. Next, humanitarian aid should be permitted to reach Syrian civilians, and finally an international conference should be organized to determine Syria's future. Syrian participation from all sectors of society should be emphasized. In order to do this, it has been suggested that the Assad regime must be presented either with the possibility of overwhelming international force or significant pressure from allies such as Russia and Iran. Russia could play a positive role in this respect, and even be a leader in the ceasefire efforts. In this scenario, the West would need to ensure that Russian interests would not be neglected. This proposal is based on the assumption that Russia could do more to pressure the Syrian regime than any other country, and that, if it chose to do so, it would be successful.
- *Consider* the unintended consequences of a no-fly zone implemented with drones, given the degree of uncertainty about the retaliatory capacity by

Assad's forces. While such a no-fly zone would be designed to create buffer zones and shift the balance of power away from the Assad regime, it could be seen as a slippery slope toward hot conflict and further civilian casualties in Syria. Unlike in the cases of Iraq and Libya a no-fly zone or safe-haven could mobilize those who have kept silent on the struggle so far to side with the regime for nationalistic reasons.

- *Promote* positive involvement of outside actors while preventing spoiler activity. While some insist that outside actors (such as Russia, Iran, the United States, Turkey, China, and Qatar) should leave Syria to its own people, others suggest that outside actors can play a positive role in resolving the ongoing violence, as well as achieving a political solution. The international community must deal with Iran's fears that a Sunni dominated Syrian regime may pose issues for the geopolitical makeup of the region.
- *Undertake* everything, together with Syrians, to assist preparations in order to avoid internal disintegration and sectarian fractionalization.
- *Put* forth the idea for a conference to begin negotiations between Syrians within and outside of Syria. These Syrians would include representatives of the regime, opposition groups, and members of the "silent majority. The interests of the Syrian people should be paramount, while realistically international interests may have a greater de facto influence.

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- *Include* the Syrian silent majority in discussions about the future of the country. Representatives from civil society, leaders of religious groups, political activists, and various other institutions should be consulted. This would allow all segments of Syrian society to be included without evoking divisive sectarian terms.
- *Understand* that several difficulties stand in the way of bringing internal actors to the table. It should be noted that opposition groups that were once formerly opposed to negotiating are beginning to change their stance on the condition that Assad agrees to step down. Sectarian differences have to be addressed urgently.
- *Realize* the circumstances that are hindering a resolution of the conflict. For example, it may be too early to decide who from the country would attend a large conference with interested parties. Additionally, several zero-sum games among actors will make any forward progress very difficult.

AFGHANISTAN

- *Include* Afghanistan's regional neighbors as the post-NATO/ISAF phase sets in by 2014. Stability in Afghanistan will depend on the involvement of its neighbors, including Iran, China, and Pakistan, as well as India and Russia. The UN can support this regional effort in the context of the Istanbul Initiative of November 2011.
- *Consider* the inclusion of Iran in the Core Group (United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) meetings on the situation in Afghanistan.
- *Recognize* that sanctions on Iran have had and will have unintended consequences for Afghanistan, largely due to increased domestic pressure on the Iranian government to expel many of the two million Afghan refugees in the country. Iranian-owned businesses in Afghanistan are currently

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being used to circumvent the economic and financial dimensions of sanctions.

- *Consider* supporting the Taliban office in Qatar through advice on how to communicate with the movement and gain acceptance of a negotiated settlement.
- *Improve* collective security by exploring the possibilities for of expanding current regional and bilateral security arrangements. This could take many forms, and would likely include an expanded Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC). While there is disagreement about the implications of including certain parties outside of the GCC, the following options should be considered: a simple expansion of the GCC including current GCC states plus Iraq, Iran, and Yemen; an enlargement of the GCC including current GCC states plus Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and the United States; and an all-inclusive GCC including current GCC states plus Iraq, Iran, Yemen, the United States, India, and Pakistan
- *Understand* that including the United States and China as parties to security arrangements in the Persian Gulf would raise significant unease among Iranians regarding outside interference in regional affairs. Of course, Iran also accepts that the framework of international maritime law allows for both commercial and warships to move through the Straits of Hormuz so long as such a presence is

not in anticipation of an attack on Iran.

- *Consider* the potential benefits of increased bilateral cooperation between the Iranian and American navies in the Persian Gulf as a confidence building measure. This could have a number of practical effects on search and rescue and anti-piracy operations in the region, but would also have the broader goal of helping to prevent an accidental war if there is no regular contact among the densely packed military forces in the region.
- *Promote* collaboration between Afghanistan's financial oversight institutions and the GCC members through joint trainings and lessons-learned workshops hosted by third countries and facilitated through the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- *Recognize* that the United States may more realistically work through the GCC or communicate through an ally if it has to send messages to Tehran. Although the Gulf is a region fraught with potential for conflict, careful diplomatic work with the international community could mitigate many of the most significant risks that currently plague the region.
- *Understand* that the Shia-Sunni divide in the region is both a reality as well as a simplified view of the region. For example, Shia populations in the region do not identify with each other the same way as their Sunni counterparts. In fact, ethnic and national identity is often much more important. Moreover, Iran maintains good relations with Sunni entities such as Tajikistan, Hamas, and other Islamic activists. Thus, the Shia-Sunni divide does not dictate its foreign policy as much as is sometimes suggested.

CHAIR'S POSTSCRIPT

POTENTIAL CRISIS INTERCONNECTEDNESS IN THE MACRO REGION

There exists a palpable interaction between the key actors and the three crises in the macro region from the Suez Channel to the Hindu Kush. The political climate in many of the Islamic countries also affects the neighbors. Due to the involvement of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, countries as far as Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in Central Asia and the Caucasus, are also affected by developments in the Gulf and the region.

Iran and Syria have held alliance-like relations during the past decades, including commercial and cultural links, as well as significant internal security collaboration. Russia has been a strategic partner for Damascus for decades, and Syria acts as a base for Russia in the Middle East—from its military, to training and education of civil services, to intelligence. The United States is the key ally of Israel, and has been very much supportive of the Syrian opposition and interested in the removal of the Assad regime. Russia has also been an ally in many dimensions for Iran. Shia Iran is the largest neighbor of Afghanistan to the west, and the two countries share close economic ties. There are some 20 percent Shia in Afghanistan, and close economic relations with Iran.

IRAN-SYRIA

Syria has long standing links with Russia and Iran but also other European states and its regional neighbors including Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, and Iraq. This automatically draws in the key strategic interest of outside powers like the United States, Russia, and EU states. Besides the interaction and Shia relationship with the Assad regime, and because of the strategic argument, some see that there is the intent to conduct a third party conflict against Iran—Iran's loss of Syria would weaken Iran's influence in the region. This furthermore intertwines the Syrian crisis with the tensions with Iran. This also concerns relations with Saudi Ara-

bia, Qatar, and the Gulf States which are, incidentally, also the economic pivot with Iran's eastern neighbor, Afghanistan. At this point clearly, the Sunni Gulf States, especially Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to support the Sunni majority as well as regime change in Syria. There have been serious tensions between the Assad regime and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Gulf States are opposed to Shia Iranian nuclear capability, and are also concerned about the situation of their Shia minorities on their respective territories. The mobilization by the Kurds through the Assad regime adds another element of instability for Turkey and Iraq.

A western military operation in Syria, or the establishment of a no-fly-zone might however have strategic ramifications concerning the disposition of the US carriers and hence implicitly interfere with the strategic options concerning Iran. The US Navy currently has two carrier task forces in the Gulf and one in the Mediterranean. A 24 hour no-fly-zone over Syria would require two carriers. In view of the current active duty level of the USN, one of the two task forces present in the Gulf would have to be transferred to the Mediterranean, a move that would clearly alter the USN presence in the Gulf region, and – as some would argue – reduce pressure on Iran. This could be alleviated if international forces were able to use a nearby airbase (either in Turkey or Iraq).

An attack on Iran, especially an Israeli attack would cause tremendous pressure on all of Iran's neighbors—certainly Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Caucasus states (particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia). It could contribute to radicalization in and around Syria and Lebanon, the mobilization of Hezbollah and present further obstacles to finding a solution to the Syrian crisis. It could trigger a concomitant Israeli attack on Lebanon.

Israel's relationship with Syria has been for decades still in a legal state of war. However, in realpolitik terms, there has been tranquility and stability on the Golan. Syria maintains more than 500 tons of chemical weapons. The possibility that such weapons might fall into the wrong hands could trigger preemptive operations

by Israeli Special Forces. Seriously enhanced instability within Syria, and its effects in the neighborhood, could in turn enhance instability for Israel. Eliminating the potential of Iranian nuclear capability for the time being and thus weakening Syria's key ally in the region could be another argument for an attack. Such an attack could, however, radicalize the Muslim Brotherhood and others, including al-Qaeda. It seems that as part of a reaction, Iran would be able to count on increased support from many states and actors—hence, some might see an advantage in an attack—and would certainly obtain the nuclear weapon sooner. The potential for unintended consequences is staggering and immense.

IRAN-AFGHANISTAN

In the case of Afghanistan, Iran profits from the US presence and support by exploiting its relatively easy access to the abundant international economic resources invested in development, by saving resources otherwise required to fight narco-traffickers and Sunni insurgents, and by profiting from a large low-cost labor pool that can be easily managed. Afghanistan also imports electricity and significant quantities of Iranian gas and petroleum products. These are all opportunities for Iran to circumvent the different sanctions in place, especially financial ones. At the same time, such elements of an ongoing US presence in Afghanistan as a free press (in a shared language), a US-trained and mentored army and police force, and demand on Afghanistan to increase the use of its own water resources (which are currently also fully available to Iran) are perceived as a long-term threat in Iran.

From the perspective of those who might want to maintain pressure on Shia Iran, the important role of a Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan may continue to be an attractive means of doing so. International sanctions are increasingly biting against Iran which might have a Sun Tsu effect, i.e. unifying and hardening national resistance, permitting the regime to squash internal opposition, and drawing continuing outside support from Russia and China, or even India and others to counterbalance

[T]he option still remains that nothing will be done—no international military operation in Syria, and no attack on Iran. The fighting in Syria will thus continue, the stream of refugees will increase, as will the effects on the neighborhood. It remains to be seen whether a strategic event or another threshold might bring about radical change concerning the Iranian question—enrichment might well continue—but the population and the Iranian economy will increasingly suffer from severely biting economic sanctions.

US, EU, and Israeli pressure.

SYRIA-AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is clearly also hostage to the possible downward spiral developments in and around Iran and Syria. Afghans seem to increasingly turn against international military presence—the dramatic spike in green on blue attacks offer tragic testimony. There is infighting and profound grievances exist. Serious economic differences exist between Afghanistan's North, South, Southeast, and West. Further radicalization and security challenges could possibly enhance the overall negative security situation in the macro region, thus also preventing tranquility around Afghanistan.

Regime change in Damascus and a possible attack on Iran might embolden Moscow in the near neighborhood, such as in Georgia which is approaching a very sensitive election period, and add another dimension

to the 2012 Kafkaz exercise. These developments might also put pressure on the American need to continually use the Northern Distribution Network, via Central Asia and Russia up to the Baltic Sea for outward transit from Afghanistan. Though this is now a bit less so as the border with Pakistan is again open for transit.

SYRIA-IRAN-CAUCASUS

Russia has a key role in the region north of Iran in former Soviet states like Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia—a strategic tit-for-tat might be possible. Greater pressure on Syria's Assad regime by the US and Friends of Syria (comparable to Libya), and/or an attack on Iran might entice Moscow to take a stance in the South Caucasus and pressure Georgia, the stalwart US ally in Russia's backyard. Russia's enhanced military presence in the occupied territories of Georgia—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—and Russia's military presence in Armenia, implicitly also increases pressure on Turkey, a key opponent to the Assad regime.

The situation is rendered still more complex by Israel's close relationship with Azerbaijan in terms of energy and arms trade and Israel's supposed acquisition of rights to use an airbase in Azerbaijan. In the event of a military operation against Iran, Russia might try to enhance its military presence in Armenia and supply its forward base there, which could imply that it tries to establish a transit of hardware from Russian territory via occupied territory in Georgia, and via Georgian territory to Armenia. The Russian Kavkaz 2012 military exercise in Russia's southern military district is a key consideration. The 2008 Kavkaz exercise took place just weeks prior to the war with Georgia. The Kavkaz 2012 exercise to occur this coming September, coincidentally just prior to the parliamentary elections in Georgia on October 1, adds considerable potential for significantly heightened security concerns.

In sum, the option still remains that nothing will be done—no international military operation in Syria, and no attack on Iran. The fighting in Syria will thus con-

tinue, the stream of refugees will increase, as will the effects on the neighborhood. However, the Assad regime might well retain power albeit increasingly weakened, and while it will lack the capacity to defeat the rebels, the rebels in turn will have insufficient strength to defeat governmental forces. It remains to be seen whether a strategic event or another threshold might bring about radical change concerning the Iranian question—enrichment might well continue—but the population and the Iranian economy will increasingly suffer from severely biting economic sanctions. Tensions might linger in Iran's northern neighborhood between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and between a politically fragile Georgia and its northern neighbor Russia. It is foreseeable that after the US elections, and another tough winter and spring of 2013, different factors, actors, and constellations might alter the stalemate or bring forward equally unsatisfying solutions.

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