



SIPRI Afghanistan Regional Dialogue

Prospects for peace and stability in Afghanistan

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Summary

After nearly 10 years of intervention by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the security situation in Afghanistan is still a major concern for the international community. Despite the many efforts and resources aimed at bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan, the result has been meagre at most. The main causes of the present situation in Afghanistan include lack of proper planning, shifting policies, inattention to geopolitical realities and over-reliance on military power without the necessary attention to development and civilian assistance plans. The current, predominantly military US/NATO approaches have little or no chance of success unless a comprehensive approach, including a vigorous humanitarian plan, is adopted. Analysis of the role of regional and neighbouring countries in Afghanistan shows that a viable solution could be found on the basis of a dialogue and regional cooperation.

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SIPRI Afghanistan Regional Dialogue

SIPRI has supported a regional dialogue on the challenges facing Afghanistan and its neighbours since 2009. The dialogue is designed to bring together experts, policymakers and representatives of international organizations to explore the key security, political, social and economic issues confronting the countries and societies of the region. A particular focus of the meetings is to develop and to advance ideas on how peace and stability can be enhanced through strengthened regional cooperation.

As part of the SIPRI initiative on Afghanistan and its neighbours, a series of background papers has been commissioned from leading experts on the region. The views expressed in these papers are entirely and solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of any institution or government.

I. Introduction

Nearly a decade since the removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, the country is struggling with instability. The security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, causing real concern and demanding an urgent solution. The conflict today is not limited to the Afghan Government and the insurgent groups but involves the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Afghanistan's neighbours and other countries in the region.

The strategies and tactics adopted by the US-led forces of NATO and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which aimed at fighting the insurgency and bringing peace and stability to this war-stricken country, have proved to be ineffective. ISAF suffer from a lack of insight into the insurgency and a lack of appropriate planning and means to defeat them.

The US Administration of President Barack Obama is faced with different problems for implementing its policy in Afghanistan. The timetable for the withdrawal of international military forces seems to be challenged by the US military establishment.¹ Indeed, the idea of establishing permanent military bases in Afghanistan is gaining support within the US Administration. In this regard, although Defense Secretary Robert Gates has ruled out permanent military bases in Afghanistan, he has emphasized that the USA is interested in keeping a military presence in this strategically important country beyond the planned end of combat in three years.²

Obviously, the idea of permanent US military bases in this highly geostrategic area would raise concerns in China, Iran, Russia and other countries. Altogether, there are serious concerns within the international community that without the required change in US military approaches Afghanistan might once again plunge into a civil war or become a scene of geostrategic competition. To avoid that grim scenario, it has been suggested that the USA should launch serious confidence-building measures to encourage countries in the region to take a more active role in development planning and peacebuilding in Afghanistan within the framework of the United Nations.

This paper aims to explore the prospects of peace and security in Afghanistan in the wake of US/NATO planned military withdrawal starting in July 2011. It analyses the present security situation in Afghanistan with regard to the predominantly military approaches, internal dynamics in Afghanistan and the idea of talking to the Taliban, the geopolitical interaction among influential powers, and the current state of development and civilian assistance programs, including their shortcomings.

¹ The withdrawal date of the troops from Afghanistan has become a controversial issue in the Obama Administration. The military establishment along with several senior politicians holds the view that the operational goals set out by Obama for Afghanistan cannot be achieved within the declared timeline. In this regard, it has been reported that US Defense Secretary Robert Gates gave assurances to General David Petraeus, commander of US-led forces in Afghanistan, that the drawdown plan was conditions-based and 'the president will decide whether changes are to be made in the strategy'. Montopoli, B., 'July 2011 deadline for Afghanistan troop withdrawal: politics over policy?', Political Hotsheet, CBS News, 24 June 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/8300-503544_162-503544.html>.

² Burns, R., 'US negotiating security deal with Afghans', Associated Press, March 7, 2011, <http://www.krqe.com/dpps/military/Gates-US-should-stay-involved-in-Afghanistan_3739337>.

II. Military approaches

On 7 October 2001, in response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September, the USA launched military operations in Afghanistan. Two military operations became active in Afghanistan involving international forces: Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and ISAF. OEF is the official name used by the US Government for the war in Afghanistan; it is a joint US, British and Afghan operation, and is separate from ISAF, which is a NATO operation that also includes the USA and the UK.

The two operations run in parallel. OEF operates primarily in the eastern and southern parts of Afghanistan along the Pakistan border. ISAF, which was established by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 on 20 December 2001, is active in other parts of the country, with NATO members providing the core of the force. The USA is the largest contributor both to ISAF and OEF and the only country among the coalition forces that has developed a strategy towards insurgency in Afghanistan.

Although at the beginning of its intervention in Afghanistan the US-led coalition was credited with removing the Taliban from power, its lack of resolve—especially after the USA diverted its attention to Iraq—led to a situation whereby the Taliban still wields strong influence in many regions in Afghanistan despite claims to the contrary by some US officials. The Taliban and the groups with which it collaborates remain deeply rooted, while the Pakistani frontier remains a Taliban safe haven.³

From the outset the US approach to Afghanistan has had a number of shortcomings. The major factor in the great loss of life, both civilian and military, appears to be a lack of necessary ethnographic and local cultural knowledge and language capabilities. This has contributed to the serious prospect for failure of the US mission, with grave geopolitical consequences. Also, some experts believe that the US Administration's path in Afghanistan is unsustainable since its objectives are not clearly defined.⁴

In the early years of invasion, a veteran military officer who was commissioned by the Pentagon to examine the war in Afghanistan expressed a pessimistic view saying that the conflict created conditions that have given 'warlordism, banditry and opium production a new lease on life'.⁵

In September 2008 the situation became so gloomy that the British ambassador to Afghanistan, Sherard Cowper-Coles, warned that the US war strategy was doomed to failure. He acknowledged that the UK had no alternative but to support the USA in Afghanistan despite the fact that the US-led NATO military operation was making things worse.⁶ That bewilderment with the US approach to Afghanistan persisted as late as December 2010. As a group of US scholars has observed, 'Our unfamiliarity with the way Afghanistan works exaggerates the scale of the problems we must solve and makes it hard even to describe a clear series of actions we can take that can lead to the achievement of our goals in the end.'⁷

³ 'Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 3 Apr. 2011, <<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/afghanistan/index.htm>>.

⁴ See Katulis, B., 'Unanswered questions on Afghanistan and Pakistan policy', Center for American Progress, 25 Jan. 2010, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/01/questions_unanswered.html>.

⁵ Comments made by Retired Army Colonel Hy Rothsteinm, AFP, 3 Apr. 2004.

⁶ Borger, J. and Tisdall, S., 'Our man in Kabul says US strategy is failing', *The Guardian*, 2 Oct. 2008.

⁷ Kagan, F. W. and Kagan, K., *Defining Success in Afghanistan* (American Enterprise Institute/Institute for the Study of War: Washington, DC, Dec. 2010).

NATO's role in Afghanistan has complicated issues even more. It has been suggested that the alliance would never have been given such a prominent role in Afghanistan if the US Administration of President George W. Bush had not been focused on intervening in Iraq at the expense of diverting its attention from Afghanistan.⁸ The mission in Afghanistan offered a new life for NATO, which had seemed condemned to irrelevance after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. But there was a problem with public opinion in NATO member countries, which was opposed to military involvement in Afghanistan. To overcome the problem, NATO members—notably Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK sold the NATO mission to their citizens as 'peacekeeping' or 'reconstruction', distinct from a counter-insurgency war. As a consequence of this approach, one NATO member state after another adopted 'caveats' that ruled out or severely limited their troops from actually carrying out combat missions in Afghanistan.⁹ Thus, from the beginning there were signs of a split in NATO over its mission in Afghanistan. George Bush wrote in his memoirs that as the years passed and the wartime decisions grew tougher, some of the allies wavered.¹⁰ In November 2007, while giving testimony to the US Congress, Secretary of Defense Gates said he was frustrated and disappointed by the lack of commitment among NATO members. Canadian General Rick Hillier, who commanded NATO forces in Afghanistan from February to August 2004, wrote in his memoirs that NATO was an unmitigated disaster in Afghanistan. 'Afghanistan has revealed. . . that NATO has reached the stage where it is a corpse decomposing'.¹¹

Reports that are critical of the way that NATO operates in respect to ISAF have also emerged. Non-NATO members of ISAF, for example Australia, are reported to have complained that they were not consulted in NATO decision making on Afghanistan.¹² In February 2008 Australian Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon declared that he had 'made it clear' to NATO that from now on Australia would expect to have a say in NATO's decision making on Afghanistan strategy.¹³ This illustrates how NATO is not on the right track in Afghanistan.

Under the Obama Administration, Afghanistan has remained at the centre-stage in US foreign policy. Although Obama's new Afghanistan policy has re-emphasized the military approach in Afghanistan, generally it has been vague from inception and has left further clarification dependent on developments. The new Afghan policy, as embodied in Obama's statement in March 2009 and the NATO Lisbon Summit Declaration of November 2010, and re-affirmed in December 2010 in the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review, had the intention to convince US allies that their support is needed with the implementation of the 'surge strategy'—similar to the approach that was implemented from 2007 by the USA in Iraq. The surge policy consists of two elements: a short-term troop increase followed quickly by the beginning of troop withdrawal. The 30 000 new US troops that were deployed to Afghanistan in 2010 were designated to focus on securing population centres where the Taliban were most active and strong, including Kandahar in the south and Khost in the east.

⁸ Porter, G., 'How Afghanistan became a war for NATO', 4 Jan. 2011, <<http://original.antiwar.com/porter/2011/01/03/how-afghanistan-became-a-war-for-nato/>>.

⁹ Porter (note 8).

¹⁰ Page, B., 'George Bush's memoir turns to crime', *The Guardian*, 9 Nov. 2010.

¹¹ Porter (note 8).

¹² Smith, S., Australian Foreign Minister, 'Intervention: International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Foreign Ministers' Meeting', 23 Apr. 2010, <http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2010/100423_intervention.html>.

¹³ 'Australia kept in the dark on Afghanistan plans: Fitzgibbon', ABC News, 11 Feb. 2008, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/02/11/2159165.htm>>.

Table 1. Afghanistan coalition military casualties, 2001–10

Year	USA	UK	Other	Total
2001	12	0	0	12
2002	49	3	17	69
2003	48	0	9	57
2004	52	1	7	60
2005	99	1	31	131
2006	98	39	54	191
2007	117	42	73	232
2008	155	51	89	295
2009	317	108	96	521
2010	368	94	99	561
Total	1 315	339	475	2 129

Source: <<http://icasualties.org/>>.

The critics of the new policy charge that in focusing on seeking to defeat the Taliban through superior military strength, the Obama Administration has paid less attention to the underlying causes and drivers of the conflict that are linked to international military presence in Afghanistan. As a result, the *Washington Post* has reported that the annual number of US troop casualties has more than doubled—to over 330 in early September 2010—compared to when Obama took office (see table 1). More than 700 NATO troops were killed in fighting in Afghanistan in 2010. Referring to Obama’s Afghanistan policy, Stephen M. Walt maintains that ‘the war is going badly, our Pakistani partner is double-dealing, and Obama made a major mistake when he decided to escalate in 2009’.¹⁴

Graham E. Fuller, a former vice-chair of the US National Intelligence Council, is of the opinion that ‘Military force will not win the day in either Afghanistan or Pakistan; crises have only grown worse under the U.S. military footprint’.¹⁵ Malou Innocent from the Cato Institute has commented on Obama’s surge policy that ‘Rather than “surge” into this volatile region, President Obama should have considered the strategic and political significance of Afghanistan’s surrounding neighbours and engaged in a regional effort to broker dialogue among India, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and, most important, Russia’.¹⁶

According to veteran investigative reporter Bob Woodward, the Obama Administration’s Afghanistan policy has transformed from the original idea of ‘defeating’ the Taliban to ‘disrupting’ them, and then ‘degrading’ the insurgents for which ‘winning’ has become a soft notion and open to interpretation.¹⁷ He also reveals the strained relations that have existed between the White House and top US generals. Some other analysts have argued that the US policy in Afghanistan is unsustainable in terms of its cost, which is estimated at up to \$70

¹⁴ Walt, S. M., ‘Debating Mark Lynch on Obama’s foreign policy failures’, *Foreign Policy*, 2 Aug. 2010, <http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/category/one_time_tags/is_obama_a_foreign_policy_failure>.

¹⁵ Fuller, G. E., ‘Obama’s policies making situation worse in Afghanistan and Pakistan’, *Huffington Post*, 10 May 2009, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/graham-e-fuller/global-viewpoint-obamas-p_b_201355.html>.

¹⁶ Innocent, M., ‘Surging toward failure in Afghanistan’, Cato Institute, 20 Mar. 2009, <http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=10061>.

¹⁷ Woodward, B., *Obama’s Wars* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2010).

Table 2. Public support for sending more troops to Afghanistan in NATO member states, 2009 and 2010

NATO member	Support, 2009	Support, 2010
Bulgaria	2%	2%
France	4%	4%
Germany	7%	7%
Italy	6%	4%
Netherlands	4%	4%
Poland	5%	2%
Portugal	4%	2%
Spain	7%	6%
Slovakia	2%	3%
Romania	5%	6%
Turkey	14%	16%
United Kingdom	11%	7%
United States	30%	25%

Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States, Transatlantic Trends, June 2009 and 2010 surveys.

billion a year.¹⁸ Experts have also questioned the success of the military operations by the coalition forces. For instance, it is claimed that the military operation in Marjah, which was represented as a successful example of counter-insurgency doctrine, was in fact a failure, since the Taliban are still present in Marjah and the US military controls only a small part of that district.¹⁹

Amid debate among NATO members concerning continuation of their military campaign in Afghanistan, the USA has asked for greater participation from some of its European allies. Nevertheless, European countries have been reluctant to send more troops to Afghanistan. Many members of the coalition, including France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK are under intense domestic political pressure to begin withdrawing from Afghanistan.²⁰ The Netherlands ended their military deployment at the end of July 2010, while Canada's then Prime Minister Steven Harper pledged in late 2008 to withdraw the majority of military forces during 2011.²¹

In a poll conducted by the *New York Times* and CBS News on 10–14 September 2010, the highest level of opposition to the US war in Afghanistan and lowest level of support were recorded. Of those questioned, the majority (54 per cent) believed that the USA should not be involved in Afghanistan, while only 38 per cent thought that it should. Of those polled, 55 per cent thought things were going badly for the USA in Afghanistan, while 38 per cent believed things were going well (see also table 2).

Among those who support the present military strategy are US conservatives, especially neo-conservatives, who believe that the current US and coalition strategy is making progress and should be continued.²²

¹⁸ A report by the US Congressional Research Service estimated that by June 2010 the monthly cost of the war in Afghanistan had reached \$5.7 bn. Belasco, A., *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11*, Congressional Research Service, 2 Sep. 2010, <www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>.

¹⁹ Dorrnsoro, G., 'Talking to the Taliban: quick fix or political solution', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 Apr. 2010, <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=eventDetail&id=2848>>.

²⁰ Dorrnsoro (note 19).

²¹ Carter, L., 'Canada Afghan mission "ends 2011"', 11 Sep. 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7610165.stm>>.

²² Terkel, A., 'Lugar on Afghan War: Americans are wondering "when will this stop?"', *Huffington Post*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/18/richard-lugar-afghanistan-stop_n_810360.html>.

Meanwhile, as July 2011, the date for the troop's withdrawal is approaching soon, the divergent views among Obama's military and civilian advisers over how to salvage a failing war in Afghanistan illustrate the uncovered tensions. Complicating that debate is the growing war's cost, which is estimated to reach \$120 billion in 2011. Polls also show increasing disenchantment, even among Republicans.²³

At another level, there have been differences between the USA and the UN over the policy objectives and modus operandi in Afghanistan. The US policy on Afghanistan was framed in terms of counter-terrorism objectives or the 'war on terror'. The objective was to destroy the safe haven from which al-Qaeda had planned and directed the September 2001 attacks. In terms of US policy aims, the Taliban were lumped into the same enemy category.²⁴ The set-up of ISAF, with a separate chain of command to the UN, has also been blamed for contradicting the recommendations for integrated missions and unity of efforts. For example, while the UN was trying to disarm militiamen as part of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme established after the Bonn process, the USA counteracted the DDR programme by recruiting the militiamen as a way of establishing security without needing to use its own military personnel.

As it loses the support of its European allies in its campaign in Afghanistan, the USA is increasingly relying on private security companies. The UN working group on the use of mercenaries warned in its second report in 2007 that 'a number of private security companies operating in zones of armed conflict are engaging in new forms of mercenarism'.²⁵ That report pointed to 'a significant increase in the number of private security companies operating in conflict-ridden areas, notably in Afghanistan and Iraq'.

New York University's Centre on International Cooperation (CIC) reported in September 2009 that the use of private security companies and militias is growing exponentially and accounts for up to a fifth of the funds spent on Afghan reconstruction. According to the CIC, many of the troop contingents in ISAF use private militias not only to guard their camps and secure convoys, but also for 'black ops', including detention and interrogation.²⁶ At the same time, the *New York Times*, quoting a Congressional research group, reported: 'Civilian contractors working for the Pentagon in Afghanistan not only outnumber the uniformed troops but also form the highest ratio of contractors to military personnel recorded in any war in the history of the United States'.²⁷

Although ISAF has neither the troop strength nor the staying power to truly defeat the Taliban through military force, it declared some successes on the battlefield in 2010. Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, while referring to the retreat of Taliban in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, cautioned that the gains were 'tenuous and fragile'. He also warned that things might get worse in Afghanistan in 2011.²⁸

²³ Chandrasekaran, R., 'Within Obama's war cabinet, a looming battle over pace of Afghanistan drawdown', *Washington Post*, 31 Mar. 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/within-obamas-war-cabinet-a-looming-battle-over-pace-of-afghanistan-drawdown/2011/03/18/AFvx955B_story.html>.

²⁴ Larsen, I. H., *UNAMA in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities in Peacemaking, State-building and Coordination*, Security in Practice no. 3 (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs: Oslo, 2010), p. 12.

²⁵ United Nations, General Assembly, Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, A/62/301, 24 Aug. 2007.

²⁶ Borger, J., 'Nato forces rely on illegal Afghan militias, report says', *The Guardian*, 16 Sep. 2009.

²⁷ Glanz, J., 'Contractors outnumber U.S. troops in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 1 Sep. 2009.

²⁸ 'Mullen: Expect more Afghanistan casualties', UPI, 13 Jan. 2011, <http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2011/01/13/Mullen-Expect-more-Afghanistan-casualties/UPI-43051294934101/#ixzz1Bqc9Pfkp>.

At the same time, President Obama addressing the issue of the establishment of security and state building in Afghanistan, declared in his new strategy: ‘It’s not to defeat every last threat to the security of Afghanistan, because, ultimately, it is Afghans who must secure their country. And it’s not nation-building, because it is Afghans who must build their nation.’²⁹ Indeed, that statement marks a departure from previous US policies for the total eradication of insurgency and plans for state building in Afghanistan. Adding to the ambiguities regarding US policies in Afghanistan, US Vice President Joe Biden, in a surprise visit to Afghanistan in early January 2011, hinted that the USA might stay in Afghanistan after 2014.³⁰ Later, Afghan President Hamid Karzai confirmed that his government was indeed negotiating with US officials for the establishment of permanent military bases in Afghanistan.³¹ However, aware of the sensitivity of the issue for Afghanistan’s neighbours, he stressed that any long-term US bases would not be ‘used as bases against other countries and that Afghanistan is not a place from where our neighbours could be threatened’.³² Previously, some reports had indicated that despite promises made in 2008 by Obama for US troop withdrawals from Afghanistan in 2011, the US troops were poised to stay there for at least three more years beyond the set deadline. Apparently, the US was following the UK’s footsteps in this regard. In June 2010, shortly after a new British Government took office, Nick Harvey, a British defence minister, stated that British troops would remain in Afghanistan ‘until the job is done’, implying that they may also stay there after 2015.³³

All in all, with the current policy approaches of the USA and its allies, it is not clear what they are really hoping to achieve in Afghanistan. Obviously, bringing stability was a goal in the short term, but the long-term strategy to uproot the insurgency and rebuild the country has been seldom raised or addressed effectively.³⁴

III. Internal dynamics

Throughout its long and turbulent history, Afghanistan has looked more like a tribal confederacy than a cohesive nation-state. Nine-tenths of Afghanistan’s population lives outside of urban areas. The country’s historical legacy and present situation have prompted some experts to propose a federal system as being more appropriate for local conditions than the present centralized government.³⁵ There is a growing consensus both within the Afghan Government and the international community in favour of promoting reconciliation between different Afghan ethnic groups. However, there are many interpretations of ‘reconciliation’. To some, it means giving amnesty to militia leaders or warlords; others see it as an internal healing process between the victims and perpetrators of grave crimes; yet others see it as involving the regional and international actors with the insurgent groups in the format of a

²⁹ The White House, ‘President Obama on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Annual Review’, 16 Dec. 2010, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/12/16/president-obama-afghanistan-pakistan-annual-review-a-very-difficult-endeavor-signifi>>.

³⁰ The White House, ‘Vice President Biden in Afghanistan: “It’s Afghans who must build their nation”’, 11 Jan. 2011, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/01/11/vice-president-biden-afghanistan-it-s-afghans-who-must-build-their-nation>>.

³¹ ‘Karzai: US seeking permanent military bases in Afghanistan’, Press TV, 9 Feb. 2011, <<http://www.presstv.ir/usdetail/164459.html>>.

³² ‘Karzai confirms US seeking permanent Afghan bases’, Earth Times, 8 Feb. 2011, <<http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/news/366346,afghan-bases-summary.html>>.

³³ Volkhonsky, B., ‘How long are Americans going to stay in Afghanistan?’, Voice of Russia, 12 Nov. 2010, <<http://english.ruvr.ru/2010/11/12/33748151.html>>.

³⁴ In fact, in the Afghanistan–Pakistan annual review address in December 2010, Obama abandoned previous lofty goals for security and state-building in Afghanistan. The White House (note 30).

³⁵ See Innocent (note 16).

peace-process. From NATO's perspective, 'reconciliation comes with two conditions, both non-negotiable for the Afghans themselves: renounce violence and terrorism and respect the Afghan constitution, including the rights of women, children and minorities'.³⁶

In his book *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, Michael Semple analyses the rationale and effectiveness of post-2001 attempts at reconciliation in Afghanistan.³⁷ He explains the poor performance of these attempts and argues that rethinking is necessary if reconciliation is to help revive the prospects for peace and stability in Afghanistan. In this vein, the question remains about the potential costs of negotiating with the Taliban, notably in terms of alienating other ethnic groups who oppose them and who have fought alongside the coalition forces against the Taliban in the past.

There is another view that the current instability in Afghanistan, rather than being due to local traditions, is the result of decades of conflict—beginning with the Soviet invasion in 1979—and the intentional dismantling of traditional structures, thereby leaving extremist groups to fill the social, political and security vacuums.³⁸ At present the most vulnerable area in Afghanistan is the south, where a large proportion of the population is Pashtun. Pashtuns throughout the area feel that the international community mainly supports the non-Pashtun ethnic groups, who in turn blame the Pashtuns for constituting the core of the insurgency, or at least accuse them of being pro-insurgency.³⁹

Talking with the Taliban

Since 2006 various partners of ISAF in Afghanistan as well as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have pursued a dialogue with Taliban figures. However, none of these efforts have borne tangible results. The main problem is finding individuals who can speak with authority for the Taliban leadership. For some time, certain strategists, in Pakistan as well as in the USA, have argued that the Taliban could be broadly divided into two categories.⁴⁰ First are the socially ultra-conservative Islamists 'good Taliban', who demand the rule of sharia in areas where they dominate. Second are the global jihadis and the terrorist ring leaders. By adopting a policy of dividing these two groups, Western powers hoped to sow discontent among the Taliban and reach a compromise with the 'good Taliban', as part of their exit strategy from Afghanistan. However, the appeasement of the Taliban in the name of the 'good Taliban' has raised concerns in the region about the ultimate goals of that policy. While these talks proceeded, the insurgency has become more violent and casualty rates have soared among the forces fighting against them.⁴¹

Many Pashtun groups and the Taliban that the USA saw as 'terrorists' were excluded from the 2001 Bonn process that set the roadmap for re-establishing territorial sovereignty to Afghanistan. The UN also did little to include them, partly as a result of US pressure and partly based on the belief that it would be possible to reach out later to those in the Taliban

³⁶ See Speech by Ambassador Mark Sedwill, NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, ISAF.NATO.INF, 2010, <<http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/transcripts/transcript-nato-senior-civilian-representative-discusses-approach-in-afghanistan.html>>.

³⁷ Semple, M., *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (United States Institute of Peace Press: Washington, DC, Sep. 2009).

³⁸ Masadykov, T., Giustozzi, A. and Page, J. M., *Negotiating with the Taliban: Toward a Solution for the Afghan Conflict*, Crisis States Working Papers Series no. 2 (London School of Economics, Crisis States Research Centre: London, Jan. 2010).

³⁹ Masadykov et al. (note 39).

⁴⁰ Saghafi-Ameri, N., 'The Taliban reincarnated', *Iran Review*, 10 May 2009, <<http://www.iranreview.org/content/view/4132/32/>>.

⁴¹ Saghafi-Ameri (note 41).

who might be willing to join the political process. The Afghan Government started to talk directly to the Taliban in 2008 through Qauym Karzai, President Karzai's elder brother. This created the misperception among many that it was not a transparent government programme aimed at reconciliation, but rather a process driven by family interests.⁴²

According to the advocates of talking to the Taliban, engaging with the Taliban in Afghanistan is a viable option for the USA. Such an approach would help to isolate the extremist elements from those who feel compelled to join the Taliban insurgency under threat or in return for favours and largesse. The Taliban have almost complete freedom of movement across the Afghan–Pakistani border.⁴³ Apart from a few short stretches, the border is open, allowing the Taliban to establish very effective supply networks.

Another disaffected group already feeling marginalized by the Karzai government is the Northern Alliance. As the main rival of the Taliban in the past, this group—which is believed to constitute more than 60 per cent of the Afghan National Army—would obviously resist any concessions to the Taliban affecting the areas populated by ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks.⁴⁴ The talks with the Taliban are perceived by the Northern Alliance and many other non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan as a threat.⁴⁵

They suspect that the effort is part of a plan to return Afghanistan to the hegemony of Pakistan and pro-Pakistan Pashtuns and to exclude northern ethnic groups from power.⁴⁶ In October 2010, President Karzai, following rumours about secret peace talks taking place with the Taliban, confirmed in an interview that ‘unofficial contacts’ with the Taliban ‘have been going on for quite some time’.⁴⁷ However, he offered a list of conditions that the Taliban must meet to be a part of Afghanistan's future, including acceptance of the constitution, laying down their weapons and cutting ties with al-Qaeda.

For their part, the Taliban leaders have denied that any talks have taken place and have made the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan a precondition for negotiations. In the past the Taliban has shown no interest in talks suggested by the West. Recently, rejecting Afghan President Karzai's bid to move toward peace talks through the mechanism of the High Peace Council, the latest step of the Afghan Government to broker talks with the Taliban, the Taliban responded harshly that, ‘How can it be possible for the officials of the Islamic Emirate to initiate clandestine contacts with the powerless and stooge government while they have already turned down the misleading demands and proposals of the weak Kabul Administration for commencement of negotiation?’⁴⁸

US officials seem to be well aware of the Taliban's mind set. The CIA chief Leon Panetta is reported to have asked why the Taliban should negotiate in good faith if they believe they are already winning. He said, ‘We have seen no evidence that they are truly interested in

⁴² Masadykov et al. (note 39)

⁴³ Dorronsoro (note 19).

⁴⁴ ‘Six experts on negotiating with the Taliban’, Council on Foreign Relations, 20 Mar. 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/18893/six_experts_on_negotiating_with_the_taliban.html>.

⁴⁵ Duparcq, E., ‘Afghanistan's oppressed Hazaras dread Taliban return’, AFP, 20 Mar. 2011, <<http://www.hazarapeople.com/2011/03/20/afghanistans-oppressed-hazaras-dread-taliban-return/>>.

⁴⁶ Rubin, B., ‘Afghanistan: Negotiations with Taliban?’, Informed Comment: Global Affairs, 16 Oct. 2007, <<http://icga.blogspot.com/2007/10/afghanistan-negotiations-with-taliban.html>>.

⁴⁷ ‘Afghan President Karzai confirms Taliban “contacts”’, BBC News, 11 Oct. 2010, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11511866>>.

⁴⁸ ‘Taliban reject Karzai's peace council as “failed”’, Reuters, 30 Sep. 2010. Questions have been raised about the independence of the council while the head of the council has been appointed by President Karzai. <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/6:30-report/796-is-the-high-peace-council-capable-of-resolving-the-afghan-crisis->>.

reconciliation'.⁴⁹ Vice President Biden has, however, endorsed the position of President Karzai in supporting a process of reconciliation with 'the Taliban who've rejected Al Qaeda and renounce violence and are prepared to embrace the Afghan constitution'.⁵⁰

IV. Geopolitical interaction

A sustainable peace in Afghanistan, despite the existing challenges, is assumed to be in the interest of the people of Afghanistan, the region and the international community. Some experts have seen the disruption of the traditional balance of power and the competition of foreign powers as the main source of instability. They have, thus, advocated the resumption of Afghanistan's status of neutrality guaranteed by major powers as a necessary step toward establishing peace and stability in this country. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the end of its neutrality status, Afghanistan has become a playground for political influence between rival—and at times even allied—powers.

Iran and the United States

As two of the major players in Afghanistan, Iran and the USA share a common interest in a stable Afghanistan. Iran has good reasons for wanting to see a more stable Afghanistan, both to tackle the problem of refugees—Iran is host to approximately 2 million registered and unregistered refugees—and to block the flow of Afghan drugs. Given Iran's considerable clout in Afghanistan, some political and military leaders in the West have acknowledged that initiating any regional approach without engaging Iran would be meaningless.⁵¹ The USA has often challenged Iran's bigger role in the region; that is believed to commensurate with Iran's acquired stature and capabilities.⁵²

There are several areas that Iran's cooperation in bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan seems to be vital. But often Iran's efforts for reconstruction of Afghanistan, expanding its trade links, fighting against illegal drugs etc, has been systematically hindered or impeded by US policy aimed at confronting Iran's growing stature in the region.⁵³

President Obama, while recognizing the constructive role that Iran can play in Afghanistan, has expressed his reserved optimism for future cooperation with Iran extending to other fields. Referring to Afghanistan, he has said that, 'I think this is one more example of where potentially, the United States and Iran could end up working together on a whole range of issues'.⁵⁴ Iran's cooperation with the USA in 2001 was vital, both for removing the Taliban and for bringing to power a democratic government in Afghanistan. However, President Bush's policy toward Iran, through his infamous 'axis of evil' rhetoric, alienated Iran and in consequence deprived the West of much needed assistance.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Blackwill, R., 'America must give the south to the Taliban', *Financial Times*, 21 July 2010.

⁵⁰ The White House (note 31).

⁵¹ Saghafi-Ameri, N., 'America needs Iran in Afghanistan', *Eurasia Critic*, June 2009.

⁵² Barzegar, K., 'Roles at odds: the roots of increased Iran–U.S. tension in the post-9/11 Middle East', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 3, fall 2010.

⁵³ On Iran's complaints about inadequacy of US/NATO cooperation in fighting against drugs, see Saghafi-Ameri, N., 'The "Afghan Drugs" Problem—A Challenge to Iran and International Security', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2, summer 2010.

⁵⁴ 'Obama interview with BBC Persian TV', BBC News, 24 Sep. 2010, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11408615>>.

⁵⁵ Saghafi-Ameri (note 41).

US advocates of engagement between Iran and the USA argue that stabilizing Afghanistan is a strategic priority for the USA and that it should seek help wherever it can find it. They argue that rather than undermining talks on the nuclear issue, contacts on Afghanistan could be an important confidence-building measure. Sceptics contend that the Afghan strategy would distract from the main focus on Iran's nuclear programme. From the Iranian perspective, US strategy in Afghanistan looks suspicious and not reliable, in particular if the USA's ultimate aim should be a permanent military presence in that country. While Iran perceives the USA as being hostile to its interests, given the Obama Administration's drive to impose additional sanctions and continue military threats, the Iranian policymakers do not regard the USA as a reliable partner for engagement in Afghanistan.⁵⁶ In fact, as Ashley Tellis correctly comments, Iranian goals in Afghanistan mostly cohere with the eight objectives pursued by the US. Iran remains opposed to both al-Qaeda and the Taliban; is deeply engaged in reconstruction activities in Afghanistan and supports an expanded Afghan role in regional trade and transit; and benefits overwhelmingly from the control of narcotics production in Afghanistan and the defeat of the Taliban's ideology. In general, stability in Afghanistan advances Iranian interests in many ways. Hence, it is not surprising that on several key issues Iran's aims converge with those of the US—in principle.⁵⁷

It is therefore suggested by some American observers that a Iranian-US channel on Afghanistan should be opened without delay and before the Afghanistan quagmire gets worse. They argue that this is also the best way to undermine the Taliban's morale, by bringing all the key regional powers into a process that could allow an eventual withdrawal of US troops.⁵⁸

India and Pakistan

Presently, Pakistan is going through a difficult time, with fighting in several of its cities and districts against the Taliban. Pakistan, which has had long-standing ties with the Taliban—indeed was instrumental in the creation of the organization—and other militant groups, is now expected to try to convince the militants to end their insurgency.⁵⁹ However, there is a perception among Afghans that elements within the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency and Pakistan continue to support insurgent groups. Pakistan is highly suspicious that Indian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private companies are engaged in clandestine activities against Pakistan. Hence, Pakistan is keen to prevent any Indian influence in Afghanistan. With Pakistan set to play a central role in any political settlement of the Afghan war, due to its sway over the Taliban, India has few options to counter its bitter rival's influence in the country.⁶⁰

For its part, India has sought to win the support of Afghans through gigantic development projects to build roads, power lines and other civilian projects. One of the largest projects that

⁵⁶ See comments made by Kazem Jalali, the speaker of the National Security Committee of the Majlis (Parliament), Aftab News, 26 Apr. 2006, <<http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdccko0o.yt0k96a22y.html>>.

⁵⁷ Tellis, A. J., 'Implementing a regional approach to Afghanistan: multiple alternatives, modest possibilities', eds A. J. Tellis and M. Mukharji, *Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, 2010).

⁵⁸ Ignatius, D., 'The US should test Iran's resolve to stabilize Afghanistan', *Washington Post*, 17 Sep. 2010.

⁵⁹ As Ahmed Rashid, a renowned expert on Afghan politics and security, says: 'There was a cell within the intelligence agency [of Pakistan] not long ago that was working to justify Pakistan's support to the Taliban in an academic and intellectual sense'. See <<http://www.paklinks.com/gs/pakistan-affairs/112355-ahmad-rashid-and-afghanistan.html>>.

⁶⁰ Reuters, 21 July 2010.

India has successfully completed in Afghanistan is the construction of a road in southern Nimroz province that provides a link for landlocked Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chahbahar. This road serves as a way to break Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan for transport links. India thus realizes that its campaign against the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan may not succeed unilaterally and that it needs Iran on its side in any meaningful campaign against the Taliban.⁶¹

Russia

Russia has watched the crisis in Afghanistan with great concern. The Taliban's re-emergence on the political scene is especially worrisome for the Russians. The greatest worry for Moscow is the penetration of militants from Afghanistan into the Central Asian states or to Chechnya. The decision to permit the transit of NATO military aid to Afghanistan via Russia is an indication of Moscow's apprehension about a Taliban victory. Such a development would leave Russia to confront the challenge of the Taliban and related Islamist extremist groups, for example the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, in Central Asia, without having the means necessary to deal with it.

Russia believes the Taliban should not be recognized as a political group or a force. They do not differentiate between moderate and hard core Taliban. For Russia, a Taliban victory would threaten not just the stability of the regimes of Central Asia, many of which are in serious trouble, but would pose serious dilemmas to Russian foreign and defence policy. Another major Russian concern is the drug war that its politicians say is being waged upon it from Afghanistan. President Medvedev has claimed that cooperating to shut down the growing drug trade is the most significant aspect of the conflict in Afghanistan.⁶²

China

China, which shares a border with Afghanistan, is positive towards a political settlement of the conflict. To better understand China's position on Afghanistan, one has to take into account China's concern over its restive Xinjiang province and the risk of a spill over from the insurgency in Afghanistan to this region. Another major factor is the unique relationship that China enjoys with Pakistan. China and Pakistan have in common complementary strategic objectives, notably containing India. On the other hand, the USA and China have developed good relations, both in respect to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

China was part of the 6 plus 2 Contact Group on Afghanistan (which brought together the six countries neighbouring Afghanistan plus the USA and Russia). After the September 2001 attacks on the USA, China supported the UN Security Council resolutions regarding Afghanistan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which China is a major partner, is now paying more attention to the conflict in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, China's main focus in Afghanistan is on trade and economic matters. A case in point is its investment in Afghanistan's Aynak copper mine, the second-largest untapped copper deposits in the world, which is also considered Afghanistan's largest-ever infrastructure project.

⁶¹ Karthikeya, R., 'India's Iran calculus', *Foreign Policy*, 24 Sep. 2010.

⁶² Blank, S., 'What does Moscow want in Afghanistan?', *Perspective*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Apr.2009), <<http://www.bu.edu/phpbin/news-cms/news/?dept=732&id=53003>>.

Other states in the region

Saudi Arabia was one of only three states, with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, to establish diplomatic relations with the Taliban government of Mullah Omar. The Taliban's Deobandi theological ideologies are close to those of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabis. Saudi Arabia has always relied heavily on Pakistan in shaping its policy towards Afghanistan. During the jihad of the 1980s, Saudi funds and logistical support were channelled to the mujahedin, almost exclusively through the ISI. Since 2001 Saudi Arabia has been cautious in its relations with Afghanistan, but the Taliban are said to prefer to have the Saudis as their partners in any reconciliation talks.

Tajikistan has close historical, cultural and traditional links with Afghanistan. Tajiks compose the second largest group in Afghanistan. During the Taliban period, the Tajiks largely supported the Northern Alliance. Tajikistan has supported the reconciliation process under Karzai's government.

Turkmenistan previously had friendly relations with the Taliban regime, based on their official policy of positive neutrality. Turkmenistan, as a member of the 'Friends of Afghanistan' group (other members include: China, the EU, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the US and Uzbekistan), supports state-building and political process—free and fair elections, establishment of a representative and accountable form of government in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan considers the Karzai government in Afghanistan to be very weak and unable to control the situation in the country. Therefore President Islam Karimov has proposed a solution for the Afghan conflict that centres on the reactivation of the 6 plus 2 initiative but with the addition of NATO ('6 plus 3').⁶³

V. Reconstruction and peacebuilding

Although there is little evidence to support a link between reconstruction assistance and improved stabilization and security, the general assumption is that development assistance is an important approach to promote stabilization and security objectives in fragile states.

Some reports indicate that the international community is falling short in financing the estimated needs of Afghanistan. According to 'The Donor Financial Review for 2008', released by Afghanistan's Ministry of Finance, the financing gap is about \$22 billion, or 48 per cent of the estimated needs.⁶⁴

A serious and concentrated plan for the development of the areas that suffer the highest percentage of poverty is a priority, not only from humanitarian aspects but also to prevent recruitment from the impoverished population by the Taliban. Previous and current development assistance has been insufficient due to many deficiencies including mismanagement and lack of coordination among donor countries. Widespread corruption is another significant issue that needs to be tackled.

The international community had a golden opportunity to help Afghans build an effective government capable of providing its population with the most basic public services. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was mandated by the UN

⁶³ 'Providing security and stability in Afghanistan: Uzbekistan's view', 14 Oct. 2010, <<http://www.acus.org/event/providing-security-and-stability-afghanistan-uzbekistan%E2%80%99s-view>>.

⁶⁴ Ashdown, P. and Ingram, J., 'Falling short on Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 29 Apr. 2009.

Security Council after 11 September 2001 to take on a range of responsibilities, from managing relief, recovery and reconstruction activities, to holding elections as well as providing political and strategic advice for the peace process. UNAMA faced difficulties from the beginning in discharging its duties. There is no single chain of command, as the military forces are not peacekeepers under a Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG). The organizational set-up is problematic because there are three supranational structures seeking to coordinate civilian efforts: UNAMA, the European Union and the NATO Senior Civilian Representative (SCR). Coordination of donor funds is difficult for any institution because power over the purse sits in the capitals and philosophies differ as to how aid should be spent to be most effective.

Instead of promoting a strong role for UNAMA, individual states took on considerable responsibility in terms of the ‘lead-nation’ concept and by managing specific Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). However, because of the lack of state capacity, most of the aid was delivered through NGOs, contractors and UN agencies. Coordination was also challenging when there were multiple bodies operating in the field. There is also a rift between the military and the NGOs with regard to the relief aid. Although the civilian–military guidelines have been adopted to set out in explicit terms what is expected of each side, the military is keen to provide the ‘humanitarian relief’ to communities directly. This has proven particularly contentious, as the NGOs argue that, by definition, anything called ‘humanitarian’ must be based on the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality—and that the military’s intentions do not fulfil those standards.⁶⁵

The evolution of ISAF into Provincial Reconstruction Teams with lead-countries deploying civilians to do reconstruction further sidelined the role of the UN in relief and reconstruction. The UN was left to monitor the security situation and to push forward the state-building agenda of the Afghan security forces, but without any contributions of its own.⁶⁶ In general, the international efforts that fuelled corruption in the government in the name of economic development actually set the overall mission back significantly.⁶⁷

At another level, the development plans for Afghanistan are affected, although indirectly, by US policy toward Iran. Afghanistan and particularly its western provinces are heavily dependent on the flow from Iran of goods and the income of migrant Afghan workers. Thus, the unilateral economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the USA and its allies may place a toll on the economic situation in Afghanistan too. Some countries, such as Turkey, have already warned of the fall-out from sanctions against Iran on the resolution of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶⁸

VI. Conclusions

Thirty years after the Soviet invasion and nearly 10 years after the invasion and occupation by US-led coalition forces, Afghanistan is suffering from insecurity and underdevelopment as a consequence of those events. In what could be developed into a new ‘great game’ in Afghanistan, especially if the USA goes ahead with the plans to establish permanent military bases in that country, a set of new competition among rival states could be envisaged.

⁶⁵ Larsen (note 25).

⁶⁶ Larsen (note 25).

⁶⁷ Kagan and Kagan (note 7).

⁶⁸ Aneja, A., ‘Iran sanctions can aggravate Iraq, Afghanistan conflicts: Turkey’, *The Hindu*, 10 June 2010.

Accordingly, it is assumed that the USA strategy in Afghanistan was not only to fight against international terrorism but also to establish permanent bases in this geostrategically important area, in order to contain China, to control Russia, and to face up to the rise of Iran.⁶⁹

Thus, the intricate conflict in Afghanistan calls for a complex multi-party peace process. The USA has the largest contingency of forces among the coalition forces in Afghanistan with a strategy to fight insurgency. That strategy has suffered in the past from a lack of realistic approaches and proper planning, on the one hand, and neglect of the geopolitical realities of the region and the role of regional players, on the other hand. The apparent dilemma that the USA is facing in its fight against the insurgency in Afghanistan derives from the fact that the ideological, financial and logistical bases of the insurgents are respectively located in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, two principal US allies in the region.

By ignoring the main causes of this predicament, the door has been left open for the resurgence of the Taliban. There seems to be a consensus among many experts that after years of faulty US policy towards Afghanistan, there is no military solution or a quick and easy way to escape the current deadly quagmire. A viable peace in Afghanistan is more likely to be realized through regional approach, in which the strategic concerns of other states, especially the neighbouring and regional countries, are taken into consideration and their active participation for peacebuilding encouraged in Afghanistan.

⁶⁹ This issue has been discussed in different academic and think-tank forums, including a meeting at the Center for Strategic Research in Tehran on 8 Mar. 2011. The report of that conference is available in Persian at: <<http://www.csrjournals.ir/index.php/1388-12-25-15-32-13/210-1389-12-18-11-13-06>>.