

ISAS Working Paper

No. 193 – 1 August 2014

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Afghanistan Today: Politics of Drawdown

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Mullah Omar's face bore no resemblance to that of the celestial beauty, Helen of Troy. Yet it too was one that caused the launch of a thousand ships, airships to be more precise, as Helen's had done. Like Troy, the besieged city of the past in Homer's epic tale of *'Illiad'*, Afghanistan of the present, was swarmed by invaders, by those whom some see as the modern counterpart of the Greeks – the Americans and their allies. As in the Trojan War, ten years down the line, the war council (NATO Summit, in this case) met, as it must have also in Mycenae of ancient Greece, in Chicago in the United States, home of the modern-day mighty Agamemnon, President Barack Obama. In Chicago, as it also had happened in the epic tale, after ten years of unwinnable and unrewarding warring, the invaders finally decided to call it a day. In "line" with a "firm commitment to a sovereign, secure and democratic Afghanistan", it was decided at the gathering of NATO leaders that the allies' "mission will be concluded by 2014".² True to his words, Obama had no intention of staying around to build a "Jeffersonian democracy" (in those parts).³

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² Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan, 21 May 2012.

³ Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 2010), p. 34.

This time, too, a Trojan horse would have to be left behind. But a problem had arisen. On *that* mythical occasion the jubilant (because the invaders had seemingly withdrawn) but unwary Trojans had dragged the huge wooden horse left outside to within their city walls, not heeding the warnings of their perceptive priest of Poseidon, Laocoon, who had urged them not to do so, but in vain. “I fear the Greeks”, he had bemoaned, “even though they come bearing gifts”! The modern-day counterparts of the Trojans, the Afghans, drawing lessons, not perhaps from the Classics with which they were unlikely to be acquainted, but from many practical experiences, had already become suspicious of the potential contemporary horse, which was purported to be Pakistan. The problem was further exacerbated by the horse now having a mind of its own, and refusing to play the current version of the classic part! Simply put, Pakistan was refusing to play ball.

This became evident in what transpired in Chicago, between Pakistan’s President Asif Zardari and Obama. While the government in Islamabad was still allied to the US and dependent on its largesse, the Americans had lost support among the people in Pakistan at large, who were revolted by the cluster bombings in Afghanistan.⁴ For a variety of reasons explained later, the relations between the two governments, and consequently leaders, had been subjected to strains. Now, gentle snubs are acceptable modes of diplomatic communication. These have been in vogue since King Solomon failed to offer the Queen of Sheba a seat immediately upon her arrival in his court (the torrid love affair was a later development). But one delivering them must be cautious that these are not slights, or worse still, insults to the one to whom they are delivered. This is precisely what may have happened in Chicago.

In his inaugural remarks at the Summit, Obama thanked the Central Asian leaders, and the Russians for assistance in reaching supplies to the US and allied forces in Afghanistan, and did not mention Pakistan even though Zardari was present. This may have been somewhat ironic given the earlier context of American rivalry with these powers and collaboration with Pakistan during the era of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The fact that the omission was not a typographical error was made abundantly clear by Obama’s denial to Zardari of a one-on-one meeting, like the one granted Afghanistan’s Karzai, who was also increasingly

⁴ Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah; Jihad in South Asia*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008). p.299

turning out to be a thorn on America's side.⁵ The last straw on the camel's, (or continuing the earlier metaphor, of the horse's) back was the exclusion of the Pakistani President from a group photograph on that occasion. But why this political 'lovers' tiff'?

Obama was obviously miffed at Pakistan's intransigence in not opening up the NATO supply routes through its territory, having closed them since, and due to, the killing of 24 Pakistani troops by the Americans at Salala near the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders (Actually, Pakistan asked for a thirty-fold increase in fees per container, which the Americans, not unreasonably, judged too excessive, though the asking price may have been a function not of value but of rage!) Coming from a culture which places great store by the norms of hospitality, Zardari must have taken these 'unkind cuts' to heart, judging by reactions. Surely there was no dearth of red carpets (Afghan, Pakistani or otherwise) in Chicago, only the lack of intention on Obama's part to lay one on for the visitor!

The Pakistani retaliation was swift. There was a sharp rebuke of Obama's policies by Bilawal Bhutto, Zardari's son, the Pakistanis lowering the level at which the criticism was delivered by a whole generation, thereby making a subtle point as well. Bilawal urged Obama to 'show courage' hinting that the American President was short on what was deemed in the Pak-Afghan culture as a manly trait, by apologizing for the Salala incident, indicating there was no 'open sesame' *mantra* for the near future for NATO with regard to the gates of entry into Afghanistan!⁶ Bilawal, who was also a co-chairman with his father Zardari of the then-ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP), went on to say: "This is truly a moment of tension and re-examination. We are at a crossroads. The future of the bilateral relationship [between the US and Pakistan] could well determine the success of moderation against extremism in South and Central Asia".⁷

Also, almost immediately, a physician, Dr. Shakeel Afridi, largely seen as being responsible for the lead in locating Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani town of Abbottabad where he was killed on 2 May 2011 by US Navy seals in an operation entitled 'Neptune Spear', was sentenced to 33 years in prison by a tribal '*jirga* court'. The ostensible allegation was "treason". Obviously America's hero, by the same count, was Pakistan's traitor! Doubtless a puzzled Afridi, a tribal medical practitioner, was paying a huge price for his understandable inability to comprehend the complexities of US-Pakistan relations, often bafflingly obtuse

⁵ For a thorough reporting of the story, see Ewen MacAskill, 'US-Pakistan tensions deepen as Obama snubs Zardari at NATO Summit', *Guardian*, 21 May 2012.

⁶ 'Bilawal urges Obama to "show courage", apologise', *Dawn*, Karachi, 22 May 2012.

⁷ *Ibid.*

even to the sharpest observer of international politics. The tit for tat reaction to Afridi's conviction on the part of the US was also somewhat unconventional. The Senate Appropriations Committee said it would cut aid to Pakistan by US\$ 33 million, explaining, should anyone query the computation of the amount, that there would be a cut of US\$ 1 million for each year of Afridi's detention! In a farcical twist to the melodrama, Pakistan announced that Afridi was tried, not for complicity with the US, but with the extremist *Lashkar-e-Toiba*, a terrorist group! Of Pakistan, said the US Senator Patrick Leahy: "It's 'Alice in wonderland' at best", also calling it a "schizophrenic ally" helping the US on the one hand, and aiding the intensely anti-American *Haqqani* Group of Al Qaeda, which has claimed responsibility for killing Americans, on the other.⁸ The expression could perhaps be more appropriate to describe the total nature of bilateral relations between these two countries, transactional in essence, where love and hate compete with each other to be the dominant characteristic feature.

Both sides pushed for a positive change when elections in Pakistan in May 2013 brought to power Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML). Soon afterwards in October Nawaz travelled to the US and met Obama. The purpose was to "mend the perennially frayed ties between the countries".⁹ Obama and Nawaz were set to make a new beginning. But there were impediments. One was the continued US drone strikes targeted at Pakistani Taliban. The Pakistanis had always taken a public posture against them, but also conveyed tacit consent through a nod and a wink. But this time round, things were rendered more difficult by the presence in the scene of Imran Khan of *Tehreek-e-Insaf*, a tactical Nawaz ally (at least for the elections, though in Pakistani domestic politics transformations between 'friend' and 'foe' can be so persistent a variable as to be seen as a constant!), whose party now controlled the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (the old North West Frontier Province), whose opposition to drones was far more than rhetorical. In fact he had vowed to order the Pakistan Air Force to shoot down drones if he came to power.¹⁰ But often power makes for pragmatism, and the case of Imran Khan, though at times kicking and screaming, was no different, and there was ultimately a grudging acquiescence on his part. This is not to say there is any consensus whatsoever on the effectiveness of drones. An American analyst has written: "The problem for Washington today is the drones programme has taken on a life of

⁸ 'Senate Committee Cuts Pakistan Aid over Conviction', Associated Press, 24 May 2012.

⁹ Mark Landler, *New York Times*, 23 October 2013

¹⁰ *Telegraph*, 25 June, 2013.

its own to the point where tactics are driving strategy than the other way round”.¹¹ Nawaz appointed as his Foreign and Security Adviser, or effective Foreign Minister (he himself formally retained the portfolio), Sartaj Aziz, a respected, senior Pashtun leader whom the Americans held in high esteem.

Bringing the Chicago declaration, with which this chapter began, to its fruition, Obama declared on 27 May 2014 that as agreed on that occasion, the US and allies would indeed withdraw from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, but the US planned to retain a number of 9,800 personnel at that time. This would be pared down to around 1,000 by 2016. Of course this plan would be dependent on an agreement by the Afghan government. Karzai was unwilling to give his seal of agreement, but the US was confident his successor would. Whatever be the case, “we shall no longer patrol Afghan cities and towns, mountains or valleys. That is a task for the Afghan people”, Obama declared with a rhetorical flourish. The only danger was that the people patrolling these areas may not be the ones that Obama had in mind, Afghan soldiers, but those of the Taliban!

The dilemma that Obama faced is well put by a Pakistani writer in the following manner: “The disastrous legacy that President Barack Obama inherited in Afghanistan is primarily the fault of former President George W. Bush and his failure to deliver sufficient political, military and economic resources to both the country (Afghanistan) and the region writ large. But lest we think revisiting the past is an unnecessary detour into mistakes no longer relevant, it is fixing these missteps that are key to preventing a complete radicalization of the region”.¹² So whether it is Iraq, or Afghanistan, Obama seems condemned to rue the errors of his predecessor which have so starkly put him, with regard to both crises, between the proverbial devil and the deep blue sea.

Pakistani-Indian Competition

At a conference on Afghanistan organized by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) and the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF), in his opening remarks Peter Witterauf laid down the reality of the critical role of Pakistan in the aftermath of the allied withdrawal, both domestically and externally. He said: “Without peace and stability in Pakistan, there will

¹¹ Audrey Kurth Cronin, ‘Why Drones Fail: When Tactics Drive Strategy’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2013.

¹² Ahmed Rashid, ‘The Afghan Conundrum’, in Maliha Lodhi (ed.), *Pakistan : Beyond the Crisis State*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 2011), p. 305

never be peace and stability in Afghanistan. And without Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US arriving at an agreement, treating each other with respect and pulling in the same direction, a solution to the present conflict is unthinkable”.¹³ Not all observers agree. At least one argues that, given Pakistan’s vulnerability to Taliban influence, its interests are better served by “a low intensity conflict in Afghanistan (which) constitutes a guarantee that the Afghan Taliban will not get involved in Pakistan politics”.¹⁴ In other words, according to this line of thinking, Pakistan would be chary of the kind of stability in Afghanistan that would allow the Afghan Taliban to combine forces with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to effect domestic transformation within the Pakistan society at most, or achieve the traditional goal of a ‘Pashtoonistan’ in the least. But this would entail risk for Pakistan, because instability in Afghanistan would always be likely to spill over into Pakistan, and this would hardly change the status quo.

Indeed it was the drive to bring about an outcome that would bring stability to Afghanistan that caused a shift in Pakistan’s strategy in early-2012. This is detailed in a SIPRI publication by Moeed Yusuf, an expert on Pakistan policy-making process.¹⁵ He speaks of a strategic change in Pakistan’s policy at that time, aiming at an inclusive reconciliation process in Afghanistan, with support and appreciation from other involved actors as Iran, the Central Asian Republics, China, Russia and Turkey. Most importantly, it implied giving up the notion of “a strategic depth in Afghanistan” (for the defence of Pakistan) rather than excluding India from a place at the table, and seeking to open up to major Afghan political groups who would likely be part of the post-2014 set-up. This also meant reaching out to even the dreaded Northern Alliance of the non-Pushtoons.¹⁶ Indeed this was followed through with a number of high level contacts with the non-Pashtoon leaders. Yusuf states that the initiative of the strategic shift came from the Foreign Ministry. If that be so, a problem surfaces. If the military does not support it, the likelihood of the policy coming to fruition is all but nil. However, the intellectual acceptance of India as a protagonist was obviously an

¹³ Dr Peter Witterauf, ‘Opening Remarks’, *Transition in Afghanistan: Post Conflict Scenarios* (IPRI 2013), p.13

¹⁴ Frederic Grare, ‘Afghanistan Post-2014: Scenarios and Consequences’, *Policy Brief*, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, February 2014, p.4

¹⁵ For details, see Moeed Yusuf, ‘Decoding Pakistan’s ‘Strategic Shift’ in Afghanistan’ SIPRI, May 2013, pp17-18

¹⁶ This is significant as, during the author’s long involvement with the Afghan issue at the United Nations as Bangladesh Ambassador and Permanent Representative, both in Geneva and thereafter in New York, he was constantly told by his Pakistani colleagues that no reconciliation was possible with the Northern Alliance, whom Pakistan would never accept as a part of the settlement of the Afghan issue.

idea whose time had come. At any rate the shift was occupying the minds of at least some key Pakistanis.

The Pakistani military operation in North Waziristan launched in June 2014, called *Zarb-e-Azab* (named after a legendary Koranic sword) was a result of the policy to really take on the extremists, something that the Army and the civil government of Nawaz Sharif were able to agree on, after some tough bargaining. But it may have come somewhat too late in terms of time, too little in terms of content, and too inconsequential in terms of result. The extremists were simply given sufficient time to cross over to ‘safe havens’ in Afghanistan (just as Pakistan provided ‘safe havens’ to anti-Kabul militants), and thus allowed to live to fight another day! Had it happened years ago, then ‘foreign forces (now about to leave) could have provided the “anvil”, with the Pakistani troops acting as the “hammer” vis-à-vis the extremist groups of the Al-Qaeda’.¹⁷ No longer.

A former Pakistani Foreign Secretary has warned, with the US, and his own country in mind: “Recent history demonstrates that turning away from Afghanistan in exasperation and indifference towards the region can be costly and does not offer an adjustable option”.¹⁸ To the extent that it includes factoring in India as a protagonist, this is probably prudent. For India’s interests in Afghanistan are too deep and abiding. First, there are civilisational links that date back way into history. In current times, a burgeoning India feels it within its right to take interest in its neighbourhood, not only to protect itself, but also to propagate its influence. Second, India has many friends in the Afghan system, including Karzai, who looks up to it to balance Pakistan’s clout which they fear. Third, India wishes to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a ‘safe-haven’ of the extremist *Deobandi* types of Islamicist extremists who could operate within and destabilise India. Finally, India has already made significant investments in Afghanistan and built up stakes that need to be safeguarded.¹⁹

The investments are substantial. India has pledged US\$ 2 billion in aid to Afghanistan. As of 2012, it has disbursed US\$ 1 billion towards a number of highly visible projects throughout the country. Bilateral aid has soared to over US\$ 280 million. India was the key sponsor of Afghanistan’s membership of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

¹⁷ *Economist*, June 28-July 4, 2014, p.26.

¹⁸ Riaz Mohammad Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism, and Resistance to Modernity* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2011), p.12

¹⁹ For a comprehensive study of India’s interests in Afghanistan, see C. Christine Fair, ‘Securing India’s interests in Afghanistan Beyond 2014’, *Asia Policy* 17 (January 2014), The National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle.

(SAARC). In 2011 India and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement which underscored the call for increased political, economic and security cooperation. In a demonstration of support for the Northern Alliance, normally pitted against the Taliban and Pakistan, India has begun negotiations with Tajikistan to reopen the Farkhor Airbase that it used in support of the Northern Alliance before 2001, the US and allied invasion.²⁰ While these initiatives were undertaken by the Congress-led government of Manmohan Singh, the policy of close engagement with Afghanistan is likely to continue during the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which came into office in New Delhi in May 2014. Any future government in Kabul will find the Indian contacts consoling. In fact, “for most Afghans the most attractive thing about India is that it is not Pakistan”.²¹

The attack on the Indian Consulate in Herat fuelled Indian suspicions, if not of Pakistan directly, but of its unwillingness to rein in elements such as the ‘Haqqani’ group, at whose doors the blame for the incident was laid. There was recognition, however, that there were many ‘nay-sayers’ in Pakistan to any conciliatory gestures that Nawaz Sharif might wish to make towards India.²² This would not render the prospects of overall reconciliation any easier.

There is, of course concern in India as to what might happen following the US drawdown. A senior Indian politician, Subramanian Swamy told the author: “It is not unreasonable to conceive that the Taliban will take effective control of Afghanistan, post US withdrawal. This will impact on Pakistan where it already has influence. It could also radicalize the other Muslim-majority countries of South Asia, Bangladesh and Maldives. This would also cause major internal problems for India with 14% Muslim population”.²³ Acknowledging the need for India to discuss with the government in Pakistan Dr Swamy pondered about the difficulty of identifying the focal point of power and policy-making in Pakistan, whether it was government, or the military, or the Inter-Services Intelligence or even Mullah Omar!

²⁰ These data are culled from Jon P. Dorchner, ‘Future Battleground of Indo/Pakistan Rivalry’, *American Diplomacy*, January 2014. http://www.unc.edu/depts./diplomat/item/2014/0105/ca/dorschner_post14.html. Downloaded on 12 June 2014

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sanjay Kumar, ‘Why was India’s Herat Consulate Attacked?’, *Diplomat*, 24 May 2014.

²³ Discussion during the World Peace Forum in Beijing, 22 June 2014

China's Interest

A new element in the Afghan equation, hitherto absent, at least in the previous decades, is the element of China. A rising power in Asia, China's claim to this status through what its policy-makers describe as 'peaceful development' does not now preclude an active economic and political interest in Afghanistan. There are at present seven Chinese companies, employing 300 Chinese personnel in Afghanistan, and Chinese President Xi Jinping has made it clear to Karzai that they have strong support of the Chinese government.²⁴

There are two major projects the Chinese are involved in: Ainak copper mines and Amu Darya oil blocks, which are already in production. The amount invested is nearly US\$ 500 million. Besides, Chinese companies have pumped in around US\$ 787 million, and a major portion has already been used. Bilateral trade has soared to US\$ 715 million. In October 2012 China and Afghanistan signed a preferential trade arrangement, with 95% of exports from Afghanistan enjoying zero-tariff. Hu Shisheng states in the paper cited: "More efforts and resources will be put into the construction of the land-based and maritime Silk Road Master Plans, in which BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) and Sino-Pakistan Economic Corridors would be crucial bridges". The writer went on to say, however, that "China's Afghan policy would be supportive of China's Pakistan Policy". But the mention of India in the connectivity to Afghanistan does imply that China would want India to have a place in a configuration of interested parties in dealing with a future Afghanistan. To that end Beijing is likely to try and persuade Islamabad, should there be any Pakistani resistance. A senior Pakistani ex-diplomat, who was also Foreign Secretary, Riaz Khokar, said of this to the author, speaking in cricketing parlance: "*That* might be the 'googly' (a ball delivered in a manner by the bowler that suddenly changes direction as it approaches the batsman) that may stump us!"²⁵

China has security concerns in Afghanistan. It is believed that a large number of Uighur separatists from the restive Xinjiang province, many belonging to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), have taken shelter in Afghan territories. To nip funding of the extremist activities in the bud, some Chinese banks initiated the cutting off of banking links involving

²⁴ The facts and figures that follow are drawn from the paper presented at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute on 27 May 2014 by Hu Shisheng, entitled 'China's Post -2014 Afghan/India Policy and Its Respective Impact upon Pakistan'.

²⁵ Discussion at World Peace Forum, Beijing, 22 June 2014.

dollar transactions with Afghan financial institutions.²⁶ After a number of recent shooting and knifing incidents in China, President Xi Jinping himself stepped in to call for tighter controls, which would obviously involve watching over Afghanistan.²⁷

Russia and Central Asia

The Russian position on Afghanistan is obviously fraught with considerable embarrassment. The Russian Federation was a major component of the Soviet Union that had invaded and physically occupied Afghanistan for over a decade (1978-1988) till they were forced into defeat and withdrawal. Part of the *Mujaheddin* who forced the humiliation upon them turned into the 'Taliban', now fighting the US-led International Security Force (ISAF). Naturally, the Russians are struggling to find acceptability among the Afghans. This has been largely possible by their key role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which Afghanistan is an observer. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus had said no one steps into the same river twice: so the tide of politics flowed in a way that as the Americans went down the scale of popularity, the Russians climbed up, aided by their partnership with the Central Asian Republics like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, all neighbours with stakes of their own in Afghanistan.

President Vladimir Putin enunciated the Russian position on post-2014 Afghanistan thus: "Russia's interest is a free, independent and sovereign Afghanistan with the inter-Afghan [sic] dialogue paving the way to national concord and socioeconomic revival of the country". He stressed that Russia will render support to Afghanistan, building friendly relations with Afghan authorities. Then touching upon the critical subject of economic interaction, of paramount interest to Russia, he added: "Russian companies are ready to join the implementation of projects aimed at restoring the Afghan economy and infrastructure".²⁸

At the conference cited earlier of the Islamabad Policy Research Institute, Yuri Krupnov, Chairman of Moscow's International Movement for Development, laid down, at least what was in his perception, the future Russian plans for Afghanistan.²⁹ These were ambitious, but

²⁶ Xiaowen Bi and Jessica Donati, CNBC Business News, 23 May 2014. 'Chinese Banks halt Afghan banking Deals over Xinjiang Unrest',

²⁷ Edward Wong, 'China Moves to Calm Restive Sinkiang Region', *New York Times* 30 May 2014.

²⁸ 'The Voice of Russia', Radio, 8 May 2013. http://voiceofrussia.com/2013+05_08/Afghanistan-to-take-care-of-its-security-while-ar... Downloaded on 26/6/2014

²⁹ Paper presented at the IPRI conference, Islamabad, 27 May 2014. The paper has been quoted in the following paragraphs.

indicative of current thinking on the subject in Moscow. It included the proposal to establish as the “main priority the mutual Russia-Pakistan-India railroad project of constructing a trunk-railway from Kunduz to Jalalabad...and a high-capacity dry-port at the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan as a base for transcontinental Indo-Siberian trunk-railway”.

The paper also floated the idea of a Common Central Asian Market that would include Pakistan and Afghanistan. There were in his view, three Russian “expectations”, all concerning Pakistan’s role. First, that Pakistan would be a key player in the formation of the market. Second, Pakistan would improve relations with India, Afghanistan and Iran, and become a “flagship of stabilization of the geopolitical situation” in Central Asia. Finally there would be an acceleration of industrialisation of Afghanistan, in which Pakistan would play an active role. He also proposed “A New Generation of Alternative Development Programmes for the Elimination of Drug Production in Afghanistan”, easier said than done as the British discovered in Helmand. The writer described Pakistan, Russia, and Iran as the ‘Big Three’ or ‘Troika’ in the development of a new regional framework for assisting Afghanistan. In this Plan, the exclusion of China and India was both stark and inexplicable. The only rational reason, if it could at all be called that, could be that the paper was being presented in Islamabad.

The three Central Asian countries that border Afghanistan are Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. All have historic and ethnic linkages with the northern provinces of Afghanistan.³⁰ All three may not be able to match the trade volumes of Pakistan or Iran, but they remain important providers of electricity, food stuff, and transportation infrastructures. As of 2009 UzbegEnergo has delivered between 90 and 130 megawatts a year of power to Kabul. The Uzbeks have linked up through road connections Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul, opening up 11 bridges along the way. Tajikistan plans on using the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA) 1000 project to export Tajik and Kyrgyz hydroelectricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Turkmenistan has improved its own road infrastructures along the borders, and provided a range of support – economic, medical and educational – to the Turkmen minority in Afghanistan. Central Asia is also an important conduit for the US and ISAF departing Afghanistan, an important route as alternative to that of a volatile Pakistan. Central Asia’s interest in the future of Afghanistan will, therefore, sustain, and the ethnic connections in

³⁰ For the source of information provided on the connections between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan on the one hand, and Afghanistan on the other, see Marlene Larulle, Sebastiaen Peyrouse, and Vera Axyonova, ‘Afghanistan-Central Asia Relationship: What role for the EU?’ Working Paper 13, FRIDE, an European Thinktank for Global Action, February 2013

their respect are no less important than the Pashtoon connections of Afghanistan with Pakistan.

Iran and Turkey

Iran and Afghanistan are closely, and inextricably, linked by history and culture. Ancient Persian rule had propagated the arts and literature, but was not an unmixed blessing as it also, somewhat repressively, caused Shiism to spread among largely-Sunni Afghans. As the power of the Iranian or Persian Safavids declined by the late-seventeenth century, a Gilzai Pashtoon chieftain, Mir Wais Hatak, freed large swathes of Afghanistan from Persian yoke. However the cultural influence remained, as it does to this day, and a Persian dialect, Dari, became the second official language of Afghanistan. There were the usual disputes between neighbours, such as with the distribution of waters, in this case of the Helmand River. Accords were signed as in 1939 and 1973, but were unheeded.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Iran trained the resistance *Mujaheddin*, like Pakistan, and also like Pakistan, hosted a huge number of refugees (over a million). But unlike Pakistan which favoured the Taliban, Iran threw in its lot with the Northern Alliance, arousing Taliban ire. In fact, in 1998 the Taliban executed a number of Iranian diplomats in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif. However after President Hamid Karzai came to power in 2001, bilateral relations improved, as Iran played a key role in the overthrow of the Taliban. Iran wields great influence over the Shia communities in Afghanistan. They include the ethnic northerners, the Tajiks, and tribes such as the Hazaras and Qizilbash. It has cosy relations with the key northern political personality and presidential contender, Abdullah Abdullah.

In recent times Iran is looking to an important role in the region, particularly since the assumption of the Presidency by Hassan Rouhani in 2013. An understanding with the US and Europe on the nuclear issue looks to be just beyond the rim of the saucer. There is increasing talk of, if not action in concert, at least in mutual empathy and understanding, between Iran and the West in Iraq, in opposing the lightning advance of the Sunni militant group, the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS). The demolition of Saddam Hussain has handed over, almost in a platter as if it were, a potential major say for Iran in Iraq. This would also be true of the larger region. The Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has stated in a recent article in a prestigious journal that Iran "seeks to enhance its regional and global

stature”, going on to emphasise “particularly with neighbouring Muslim majority countries and non-aligned states ...”³¹ This, most certainly, included Afghanistan.

Iran is also increasingly coordinating its position with India on the Afghan situation. The issue was the subject of a discussion in February 2014 between Javad Zarif and then Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on Global Power and Regional Security.³² Importantly they both discussed the Chabahar port, a project of immense strategic significance to India. It would allow for crucial and cost-effective access to both Afghanistan and Central Asia, and India is expected to provide US\$ 300 million towards it.³³ Given the recognised diplomatic skills of Javad Zarif, it is very likely he would also keep close contact with Pakistan. In a future Afghanistan, Iran will have the potential to be a significant protagonist not just because of its ‘hard power’ in terms of military and economic capabilities, but also the ‘soft power’ of its cultural and civilisational influences.³⁴ Indeed, former Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said quite unequivocally to the Third World Peace Forum in Beijing, “Iran has to be included in any discussion on that part of the world (the broad Middle East)”.³⁵

Turkey exerts such a ‘soft power’ influence on Afghanistan, indeed even more so. Historical ties date back to Turkish imperial suzerainty over Central Asia. Turkic culture, of which the fountainhead is Turkey, is preponderant in vast areas of Afghanistan, in particular the north. The father of the modern-day Turkey, Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, received Afghanistan’s King Amanullah Khan in Ankara in 1923, and Afghanistan became the second country to formally recognise the Turkish Republic that Ataturk set up. Turkey, a NATO member, naturally opposed the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Since the Karzai government took over in 2001, Turkey has pumped in over US\$ 307 million into over 200 projects dedicated to public

³¹ Mohammad Javad Zarif , ‘What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era’, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141209/mohammad-javad-zarif/what-iran-really...30/6/2014>.

³² For details on this bilateral meeting, see Sachin Parashar, ‘India, Iran look to boost relations with Afghanistan’, *Times of India*, 3 February 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-iran-look-to=boost-relations-on-Afghani...30/6/2014>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The concept of ‘soft power’ is largely owed to the American analyst, Joseph Nye. He defines ‘soft power’ as the “ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments: It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals and policies. When our (the US) policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced”. Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs: New York, 2004), p. x

³⁵ Remarks at the Forum, Beijing, 22 June 2014.

welfare in Afghanistan.³⁶ Overall, the perceptions of Turkey throughout Afghanistan are extremely positive, and it is often said that ‘Turkey and Afghanistan have all things in common, except borders’. While Turkish troops are indeed present with ISAF forces, Turkey has been extremely circumspect as to how they have behaved, not getting involved in any combat situations, and confining themselves to lending humanitarian assistance.³⁷

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Turkey towards efforts in stabilising Afghanistan has been the initiation of the Trilateral Summit process between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey. It originated from a visit of then Turkish Foreign Minister, now President, Abdullah Gul, to Pakistan in February 2007. Despite the assassination of the chief Afghan negotiator Burhanuddin Rabbani in September, the process continued, and to date eight meetings have been held, the last being in Ankara on 13 February 2014.³⁸ The initiative morphed into what came to be known as the ‘Istanbul process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan’. This again blended with the ‘Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference’ which had convened in Kabul earlier in June 2012. At that Afghan-led event Afghanistan and its regional partners had reconfirmed their commitment to strengthen regional security and cooperation for a ‘secure and stable Afghanistan’, including through enhanced regional dialogue and confidence-building measures.³⁹

On that occasion the heads of government of Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan issued a joint statement. Among other elements in the operative paragraphs some stand out as important in the context of the continued relationship between the three countries with regard to the future of Afghanistan, on the backdrop of the broader role of the international community. One was that they acknowledged the development cooperation of Turkey and Afghanistan in the reconstruction and stabilisation of Afghanistan, and the other was that they underscored that the international community should also continue to support Afghanistan’s socio-economic development beyond 2014 (in the post-ISAF withdrawal phase), as well as in “enhancing the

³⁶ See, Ihsan Bal, ‘Why is Turkey in Afghanistan?’, *Journal of Turkish Weekly*. 2 May 2014. <http://www.turkishweekly.net?columnist/3616/why-is-turkey-in-afghanistan.html>. Downloaded on 30 June 2014. The writer ascribes three reasons for it: First, historic links; second, Afghanistan’s stability; and third, Turkey’s international responsibility.

³⁷ Discussion with Admiral (Ret.) Salim Dervisoglu, Chairman, Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies, Istanbul, in Beijing 22 June 2014.

³⁸ ‘Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey Summit in Ankara on Thursday’, *Anadolu Agency* <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/286738—afghanistan-pakistan-turkey-summit-in-ankara-...30/6/2014>

³⁹ ‘Heart of Asia’ Ministerial Conference met in Kabul in 2012, and, the latest to date, the fourth, in Tianjin, China in 2014. The Conference Declaration in Kabul was at pains to explain that the ‘Heart of Asia’ concept does not denote a new geographical entity, but merely refers to Afghanistan and its ‘near and extended’ neighbours. The countries involved are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan.

Afghan National Security Forces – thus also bringing in the military/security component.⁴⁰
All these factors point to a major role for Turkey in Afghanistan’s future.

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⁴⁰ ‘Trilateral Summit Joint Statement’, Office of the President, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Kabul, 13 February, 2014.