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FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the United States (U.S.) and the Coalition, the conflict in Afghanistan is over eight years long. For the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) it is over six. This report is divided into two halves.

1.

The first half reflected on the nature of NATO's current involvement in the conflict. A number of conclusions were drawn. First, Gen. Stanley McChrystal's counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy, currently official U.S. and arguably NATO policy fails to address the current lack of cohesion within NATO and the existence of a "two-tier" alliance. The example used is the German government's recent decision on the eve of the London Conference to increase their contingent by 500 troops; a full month after other allies had done the same. Further, the German troops would not pursue an intensive COIN strategy, but rather focus on military aid and reconstruction. Second, there appears to be no allied vision of a political end-state in Afghanistan, which contributes to NATO's lack of political engagement in the country, as well as Pakistan and the wider region. Of course, the absence of an allied vision makes it difficult, if not impossible to debate the level and nature of each ally's engagement. Also, absent from a political strategy is the acknowledgment of the

political changes that have occurred in Afghanistan during the inter-war years, specifically, the question of acceptability concerning the current Afghan elite. Further, there is clearly no consensus within NATO with regards to whether a political solution to the conflict exists or with whom they should negotiate.

The first half of this report also examined the conflict from an Afghan perspective and underscored that a military solution is not the right solution. Afghanistan is not going to change soon into a liberal democracy. It is an Islamic society, which is reconfirmed in the country's constitution. Also, Afghanistan is surrounded by Islamic neighbours who are fully aware of this fact and are using it to their advantage. In seeking a solution f, this truth must be adopted; otherwise the mission is destined to fail.

2. FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The second half of this report examined the conflict in Afghanistan from a regional perspective. Specifically, it endeavored to determine which of three future scenarios would best serve the interests of the regions main actors. Here, the aim was to give greater clarity to the regional forces at play. The three scenarios under discussion were as follows:

SCENARIO ONE: THE U.S., THE COALITION AND NATO REMAIN IN AFGHANISTAN INDEFINATELY, BUT FAIL TO CURB THE INSURGENCY. THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT (GIRoA) REMAINS WEAK. BOTH THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY (ANA) AND POLICE (ANP) ARE INADEQUATELY TRAINED AND EQUIPPED, THUS THEY ARE UNABLE TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECURING THE COUNTRY INDEPENDANTLY. THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND IS SIMILAR TO THAT AT THE TIME OF WRITING IN LATE 2009.

SCENARIO TWO: THE U.S., THE COALITION AND NATO WITHDRAW PRECIPITOUSLY, HAVING FAILED TO CURB THE INSURGENCY. THE GIRoA REMAINS WEAK. BOTH THE ANA AND ANP ARE INADEQUATELY TRAINED AND EQUIPPED, THUS THEY ARE UNABLE TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECURING THE COUNTRY INDEPENDANTLY. THERE IS THE

STRONG POSSIBILITY THAT THE TALIBAN WILL RETURN TO POWER.

SCENARIO THREE: THE U.S., THE COALITION AND NATO WITHDRAW, HAVING ACHIEVED THEIR RESPECTIVE GOALS AND STABILIZED AFGHANISTAN. THE GIRoA IS RELATIVELY STRONG. BOTH THE ANA AND ANP ARE ADEQUATELY TRAINED AND EQUIPPED. THUS, THEY ARE ABLE TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECURING THE COUNTRY EITHER INDEPENDANTLY OR WITH LIMITED FOREIGN ASSISTANCE. FOREIGN ADVISORS AND A LIMITED NUMBER OF TROOPS STAY ON, THE LATTER AS INSURANCE FOR THE ANA AND ANP. THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN IS SIMILAR TO THAT OF 1978, BEFORE THE SOVIET INVASION.

The regional actors examined were Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Central Asia and China.

2.1. IRAN

For Iran, this report concludes that of the three scenarios under discussion, the first would best serve Iranian interests. An indefinite continuation of the status quo would facilitate the peaceful growth of Iranian influence in Afghanistan to the detriment of Pakistan, thereby strengthening Iran regionally. Further, it would solidify Iran's role as the protector of Shiite Muslims. The U.S. and the West, being bogged down in Afghanistan, will have a much weaker hand on other issues pertinent to Iranian interests, such as Iran's

nuclear program or Western interference in Iranian domestic politics. In the first scenario Iran can also expand its economic influence not only in Afghanistan but also via its territory in the Central Asian Republics (e.g. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan).

2.2. PAKISTAN

Short of normalization with India, none of the three scenarios under discussion would likely reconcile Pakistan's desired end-state, that of a stable and unified Afghanistan, with a Pakistan-friendly government in Kabul. If India is Pakistan's prime concern, two scenarios stand out. Taking into consideration the respective disadvantages of each, the second scenario seems comparatively worse. While the continuation of the status quo would likely subvert stability and security in Pakistan, the impact is likely to be greater if the U.S. and NATO were to precipitously withdraw. In the absence of U.S. and NATO forces it is likely that Afghanistan would not only descend into chaos, which would fuel the forces of militancy in Pakistan, but their withdrawal may even serve to embolden the militants. The militants could also use Afghanistan as a source of funding through the drug trade as well as a base to receive weapons and plan and execute further attacks inside Pakistan. The second scenario also raises the possibility of an ethnically fractured Afghanistan, which would threaten the integrity of the Pakistani state.

Of the two scenarios then, the first would appear the better of the two, and the best of a bad set of options overall.

2.3. RUSSIA

The most desirable scenario for Russia would be a continuing presence of NATO and U.S. troops in Afghanistan, provided it will not lead to a political and military success in the country as well as growing Western presence in Central Asia. A prolonged, gradual defeat of the U.S. and NATO will divide the Western Powers and question any future 'out-of-area' operation. The scenario of collective withdrawal of NATO and U.S. troops from Afghanistan is less attractive for Russia, but Moscow can still draw benefits from it. The worst-case scenario for Russia would be a permanent Western presence both in Afghanistan and Central Asia, leading to the stabilization of the security situation and attaching them stronger to the West.

2.4. CENTRAL ASIA

Assuming an efficient U.S. and NATO policy in the region, Russian cooperation and the stabilization of the situation in Pakistan, the third scenario, namely a U.S. and NATO withdrawal, having successfully stabilized Afghanistan would be without doubt the most desirable for Central Asia. It would allow Central Asia to strengthen and deepen all the benefits the region has gained since the launch of operation 'Enduring Freedom' in 2001.

2.5. CHINA

China is torn between two competing interests. On the one hand it would like to see Afghanistan stabilized. On the other hand it would like to see U.S. and NATO troops withdrawn as soon as possible. Neither the second nor third scenarios appear to reconcile these interests. While instability would likely follow a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal, the stabilization of Afghanistan would likely result in a limited number of U.S. troops staying on and a success of American and NATO military intervention in Asia. The first scenario appears to offer China a good compromise. While a continuation of the status quo would keep the U.S. and NATO bogged down militarily, their presence would ensure a degree of security and stability in Afghanistan. This would serve Chinese national security (provided that the security situation in Afghanistan does not worsen), secure Chinese investments and allow Beijing to increase its political and economic influence in the country. Thus, of the three scenarios under discussion the first would appear the most desirable for China.

2.6. CONCLUSION

Of the three scenarios discussed the first scenario then, namely the continuation of the status quo would appear to best serve the interests of the majority of the regional actors examined, specifically all but Central Asia. Thus, this leads to the conclusion that Iran, Pakistan, Russia and

China, while willing to offer limited assistance, it is unlikely that they will do so to an extent that enables the U.S., the Coalition and NATO to withdraw from Afghanistan anytime soon.

1. NATO: REFLECTION ON STATUS QUO

1.

Developments on the battlefield in 2006-2009 caused a change in the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and brought an intensified COIN strategy to the fore. Owing to the number of U.S. troops increased by 30,000, the President Obama-accepted, Gen. Stanley McChrystal's plan in its military dimension means more concentrated operations against the Taliban guerilla, and in the political-military dimension—the start of the critical stage of the “Afghanization” of the conflict as well as an attempt to create a coherent Afghanistan-Pakistan („Af-Pak”) strategy. The sped-up “Afghanization” of the ongoing war is the inevitable result of President Obama's decision to set the (tentative) date (July 2011) for the beginning of the conditional withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. The Canadian government, too, resolved to withdraw its troops in 2011. Clearly, the sine qua non for the success of the “Afghanization” strategy is the creation of an efficient Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) capable to take independent action in the field. To fulfill this and other political conditions relating to the government in Kabul appears difficult at present, especially given the planned time frame. NATO's ISAF strategy for military

action, devised for four stages, has been implemented from 2003, albeit with considerable difficulty. Particularly difficult were stages 3 and 4, in which NATO assumed overall command of southern Afghanistan from the U.S. in 2006. In doing so, NATO met considerable resistance from the Taliban who controlled the area. In the South, the ANA and ANSF have so far been ineffective. Whether they will be more willing to fight, following a massive reinforcement of U.S. troops, remains to be seen.

2.

President Obama's decision to begin the drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in July 2011 assumes the realization of an (over)optimistic scenario: If the intensified COIN strategy, which has been accepted also by NATO, does not succeed in destroying the Taliban, it will at least neutralize their offensive potential. On the other hand, the plan for the “Afghanization” of the war, which President Karzai unveiled during the conference in London in late January 2010, was taken at face value by the 70 participating countries. Karzai's “Afghanization” plan cautiously assumes that the ANSF will take “the lead and [will] conduct [...] the majority of operations in the insecure areas of Afghanistan within three years and take responsibility for physical security in five years.” Further, by October 2011, the strength of the ANA will grow to 171,600. This already raises the question whether President Obama's

decision to drawdown U.S. troops will be enforceable within the time frame planned by him. The length of the first stage of Karzai's proposal, accounting for the ANSF build-up and operations, suggests that any potential drawdown of U.S. (and ISAF) troops will be spread over many years. The decision of the North Atlantic Council prior to the London conference assumed that only at a conference in Kabul, to be held towards the end of 2010, a plan would be put forward for the gradual taking over by the Afghans of responsibility for security in particular provinces. It seems therefore that the current declarations of particular NATO member states that they will withdraw their troops in 2011 should be treated as an expression of intent (and of the pressure of public opinion), rather than as a precise operation plan. A concrete plan will be formed, first and foremost, on the battlefield and the political fronts in Afghanistan itself. President Obama's decision to build up the U.S. contingent as well as the relevant commitments made by other NATO members (additional 9,000 men) should be treated as a minimum involvement, as a decision to buy time for the planned "Afghanization" strategy.

3.

In principle, Gen. McChrystal's plan did not result in revolutionary changes in NATO's political strategy. ISAF's Strategic Vision, accepted in Bucharest in the spring of 2008, explicitly spoke of a gradual

reduction of the role of NATO and the allies' forces in direct clashes with the Taliban, and emphasized a greater focus on "training and mentoring" the ANA and ANSF (primarily the police). The lack of cohesion in NATO members' hands-on activities, which resulted in the formation of a "two-tier alliance," has still not been eliminated. The switch to an intensified COIN strategy, like that championed by Gen. McChrystal, has not eliminated the existing divisions. This applies in particular to the position taken by Germany. Already after Gen. McChrystal's strategy was approved by President Obama and NATO, on the eve of the London conference German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that Berlin might send an additional 500-800 troops, thus taking their total number in Afghanistan to 5,000. However, as in the past, the German contingent would focus on military aid and on reconstruction efforts. The German Defense Minister added that even though German soldiers should increase their "presence in the area", he nevertheless ruled out their participation in offensive combat operations. The prospect for getting "closer to the people" by pursuing the COIN strategy did not appeal to German politicians and even less so to the German public. Paradoxically, it was predominantly the Taliban who could facilitate the relevant changes, provided their attacks could force the German contingent to undertake more frequent and larger-scale operations outside their bases. This, however, would not be the

best way of squaring the circle of NATO's strategy.

4.

However, the dilemma confronting NATO is above all how to coordinate political strategy with actions on the battlefield. This concerns, among other things, the extremely complex "Af-Pak" strategy. Here, given the possibility of both political and military actions (forces projection), it is the U.S., not NATO as an organization, who plays the key role. The ISAF's Strategic Vision of 2008 confined itself, with regard to Pakistan, to an array of obvious demands which for equally obvious reasons Islamabad was not able (or going) to fulfill. However, in the political and economic aspects of a possible "Af-Pak" strategy, Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries of the Middle East have a role to play. This means that at the end of the day, if something goes wrong, NATO will share the political losses, despite not being the principal actor in the play. Another problem is the creation of an effective Afghan army and security forces. This is an organizational challenge and, above all, a political challenge. As far as the first issue is concerned, the existing and planned forms of coordination and aid already create a dense institutional structure. At times, this structure is even too dense, bearing in mind the bilateral actions and the EU involvement (police training within the EUPOL, but also the NATO Training Mission-A). Coordination will require even

greater efforts (coordinating the coordinators). But even if the organizational obstacles are overcome (which is very likely), there will remain the issue of political representativeness which constitutes the basic problem in motivating and maintaining esprit de corps among the ANA and ANSF.

5.

Despite the turbulence in the course of last year's presidential election in Afghanistan, NATO assumes that the question is, at least formally, resolved. The Afghan parliamentary elections rescheduled by President Karzai for September 2010 may be another element that may strengthen the legitimacy of the Kabul government. In practice, however, there arise growing doubts over the political acceptability of the current elites. Therefore NATO's political strategy gives no space to the probably fundamental issue, namely to the changes that occurred as a result of the long war among the Taliban themselves and, more broadly, in the composition and structure of the local Afghan elites, especially in the areas that have witnessed the most severe clashes. To what extent are the traditional tribal elites still representative of the wider community? What place in the informal power structure do the new commanders and their followers take? Will the planned Grand Peace Jirga, that is to precede the conference in Kabul, draw those who actually make decisions on the battlefield? This is the area where many things are left

unsaid, and not by accident. This is related with difficulties in outlining realistic political projects for Afghanistan, which, in turn, makes it difficult to outline a political project for NATO in Afghanistan that would go beyond the international community's platitudinous wishes.

6.

The general goal, outlined in multiple NATO documents, remains unchanged: to make "the Afghan government [...] able to extend the reach of good governance, reconstruction, and development throughout the country to the benefit of all its citizens". Added to this wish is the demand for democracy and women's rights. Taken literally, this wish list implies for NATO the role of a benevolent, although armed, mediator, and at the same time involves the Alliance in a more ambitious nation-building project. These tasks combine COIN, as a military strategy, economic aid, activities of the military-civilian PRTs, etc. So far, this strategy does not put out any clear-cut statement that in this type of warfare, to bring the other side to the negotiation table ranks first. In presenting his plan, Gen. McChrystal, approached this issue much more clearly by saying, "I believe that a political solution to all conflicts is the inevitable outcome." As the commander of NATO troops and a supporter of an intensified COIN strategy he added, nevertheless, "It's not my job to extend olive branches, but it is my job to help set conditions where people in the right positions can

have options on the way forward." During a January 2010 visit to Pakistan, Defense Secretary Robert Gates made another step stating that the "Taliban were part of Afghanistan's political fabric" (if they broke ties with Al-Qaeda). Yet, the lack of NATO's clear standpoint on this matter is not accidental. NATO and its members are unable – or consider it untimely – to determine whether such partner for negotiations and for a more comprehensive political solution exists at all. In contrast, participants in the London conference backed President Karzai's none too realistic project "to offer an honorable place in society to those willing to renounce violence, participate in the free and open society and respect the principles that are enshrined in the Afghan constitution, cut ties with the Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, and pursue their political goals peacefully". To this end, the international community will establish a Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund that will go toward the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program.

7.

When speaking about NATO's involvement in Afghanistan, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Alliance's credibility which has already grown into a fundamental principle. The value that determines the alliance's weight and role within the international security system is unquestionable. Ergo, by involving itself in Afghanistan on behalf of the United Nations, NATO cannot lose

this war. Credibility as a call mobilizing the elites (and to a less extent, societies) is of fundamental significance, although the emergence of a “two-tier alliance” at the start, as it were, of ISAF operations dented its integrity. Yet, as a specific principle defining the notion of victory and defeat, this call is not particularly rousing any more. It implies a strategy that is meant to lead through COIN to nation-building on terms of total victory. This type of zero-sum game has the desired effect only in exceptional cases. Therefore it seems that realistically to define the political tasks to be undertaken in Afghanistan comes as the greatest challenge to NATO.

Clarification on the specific terms of a compromise will occur at the end of this process. But before this happens, NATO’s new military strategy will be tested not only in COIN operations, but first and foremost in the ability to train an efficient Afghan force – its transformation from an unreliable and to some extent corrupt auxiliaries into a fighting force. No doubt, this part of NATO’s strategy will be supported by all its members. Especially by those whose troops operate under so-called “national caveats”. The same could be said of the entire spectrum of activities of a non-military nature. If, however, the optimistic assumptions about the ANA and the ANSF and about the effectiveness of COIN prove to be unrealistic, or materialize only in part, NATO will face crucial choice whose consequences are presently difficult to predict. When considering options for NATO and

especially for the USA, one should constantly keep in mind the arguments that were raised during the discussion about Gen. McChrystal’s plan, particularly those voiced by the U.S. ambassador in Kabul, retired Gen. Karl W. Eikenberry.

8.

As has already been noted, beyond the reach of NATO is the “Af-Pak” strategy, consequently a key element of the strategy to narrow the Talib area of operations, while at the same time to strengthen the stability of Pakistan. There is no need to repeat here the findings regarding Islamabad’s attitude toward the war in Afghanistan (see the chapter on Pakistan). Suffice to remember that they do not imply total victory of NATO and of the related nation-building project. In the backdrop of the “Af-Pak” strategy one can find Islamabad’s strategic demand for an unspecified compromise that would enable Pakistan to maintain its influence in Afghanistan. According to Ambassador Eikenberry, “Pakistan will remain the single greatest source of Afghan instability so long as the border sanctuaries remain, and Pakistan views its strategic interests as best served by a weak neighbor.” Thus, it is a matter of speculation whether in fighting and narrowing the “Afghan Taliban’s” area of operations Pakistan would be inclined to act as radically as it has recently done with regard to the “Pakistani Taliban” in Waziristan. If the reserve shown by Islamabad in practice

does not change into vigorous cooperation, NATO will, perforce, get involved in the most unwelcome conflict that is extremely difficult to resolve.

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AFGHANISTAN

1. FACTORS AFFECTING AFGHAN POLICY

Since the creation of the Afghan state, Afghan policy has by and large been interwoven with religion. Islam has served as the main point of reference for almost all Afghan authorities to date. As history has shown, almost all those in power have faced the problem of balancing religious beliefs with modern state institutions. At the same time it should be said that since the creation of the Afghan state, all attempts at reform have faced stiff opposition from the clerics. What is characteristic for Afghanistan is that such opposition often culminates in armed conflict in the name of Jihad.

Desire for independence among the ethnic Pashtuns, who mainly live in areas adjacent to Pakistan, has undoubtedly influenced the development of political tradition in Afghanistan. Having been built for many years, administrative independence in some Afghan provinces has developed and strengthened traditional forms of governance. From today's perspective, these two factors are crucial, namely well-entrenched independence from central government and second, the influence of the clerics, which in recent decades has begun to reconcile a traditional world view with a fundamentalist one.

Here, it is important to note the unifying role of Islam as a way of coalescing different ideologies within the idea of Jihad (holy war) and Shahadat (martyrdom). Most analysts agree, that though there may exist many differences within today's Afghan insurgency, it is nonetheless relatively unified. This is an important factor that distinguishes today's Jihad, from that of the 1980s and early 1990s, when various political parties and armed groups disbanded due to the lack of real leadership especially inside Afghanistan.

This paper will consider two scenarios, first, a long-term US and NATO commitment to the Afghan government and second, a near-term withdrawal of international forces. In both cases, the same problem arises, that being, international forces will be perceived in the eyes of ordinary Afghans as an occupying force. So as long as their presence can be used for political gain, it will be done. The main problem is the perception of power in Afghanistan and how power can be reconciled in a traditional way.

Here, we have to deal with the classic fight between the 'justs' and the government, who assumes power in an unlawful manner ('zolm' – 'tyrant'). This notion is interwoven in Afghan tradition, but is nonetheless still very popular today. An additional factor that favours the insurgents (especially in terms of propaganda) is the military disparity between themselves and the international

forces in Afghanistan, which serves to strengthen the ideology of martyrdom. Martyrdom against the 'zolm' is an obligation for all Muslims (especially in the Iranian world). The insurgents also use terminology associated with faith. For as long as the fight against 'tyranny' continues, this will continue to be done (I also think of fighting against infidels).

In short, the primary problem in Afghanistan is the presence of international forces. The secondary problem, at least for the time being is the scramble for power that will inevitably follow their withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The support of both U.S. and ISAF troops for the 'non-Islamic' government in Kabul creates the dual image of 'mujahedeens' fighting for a government that is just, against a tyrant (i.e. the Karzai government) supported by infidels (i.e. the West).

On the other hand, both economical as well as military support for the Afghan government enables the reconstruction of state structures as well as infrastructure essential for any modern country. Reform in almost all state sectors encounters armed resistance. Thus, this raises the question, why? In broad strokes, many of the measures taken by the Afghan authorities are seen as incoherent with Sharia law, as well as the Muslim faith. As a result, destruction is recommended. Further, every Afghan leader who acts in a bad way is seen as the cause of all

failures in the eyes of ordinary Afghans. Thus, better faith can be ensured only by overthrowing a 'bad' authority. A bad authority also oppresses people, similar to how today's government permits 'infidels' to murder Muslims, an example being the civilian casualties that result from air strikes conducted by international forces. In short, the right among ordinary Afghans to resist today's government, traditionally speaking is increasing.

There are also other factors to consider, namely strong pressure from the clerics (similar to exposing authorities to a test of faith) in cases connected with morality. An example is a rather famous case concerning a journalist, who was sentenced to death for an offence against the Quran, or another case in which a man was sentenced to death for apostasy. Here, President Karzai is clearly drawn between the ideas of the Western world and basic tradition, which is represented by a large number of the clerics (and not only the conservative ones). The hard liners in today's clerics are steadily gaining the ground they lost in 2001. This is clearly evident when observing publications funded by the Afghan Ministry of Hajj and Waqf (Ministry of Pilgrim and Religious Foundations). Speaking from experience, the Ministry of Hajj and Waqf, which is dominated by the conservative clerics with ties to the Naqshbandi Order, has for some time been running a program, the main goal of which has been to create a universal curriculum (accepted by all

clerks/officials) for all the madrassas in Afghanistan. This was only possible after the Karzai government created additional posts for these clerics in the Ministry. This example is important on account of information illustrating the level of access to education in rural areas, Madrassas are the only functioning schools there. Thus, this means that the fight for the souls and minds of young Afghans is not being won. With this in mind, and the fact that positions in state institutions are being filled by the conservative clerics, it would seem like international forces have lost the ideological battle. Therefore all that is left is the military one. But does this bring significant changes?

2. LONG-TERM U.S., COALITION AND NATO SUPPORT FOR THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT

Most analysts are currently asking themselves, whether it is in fact possible to defeat the insurgents in Afghanistan as well as those in neighboring countries with military force? Thus, for the purpose of this analysis we need to establish two scenarios, first, military success and second, military failure. With regards to the first scenario, it seems likely that a military success would weaken Afghan support for the insurgents (as the military action of international forces usually serves to swell the level of support). As a result, the insurgents would likely abandon armed fights, and instead resort to terrorist activities (as has been the case with groups

like ETA). Terrorist activities would aim to weaken the central government, as well as intensify political actions. Given the possibility that the insurgents would assume power, this may give rise to a dictatorship in Afghanistan, as the Afghan government tries to consolidate its power. What would be the consequences of all this? Maintaining control over the whole country, particularly the unstable areas which are mainly populated by Pashtuns, would require the central government to grant a high-degree of independence to those governing in such areas. This could include the exclusion of central government from some provinces. However, bearing in mind the instability in bordering Pakistan, coupled with the 'Pashtunistan' problem, the government in Kabul is not in a position to do this. Would this be possible after having stabilized Pakistan? The key question here, is whether military success in Afghanistan is possible without militarily succeeding in Pakistan?

The second scenario assumes that international forces withdraw from Afghanistan in the long-term, having failed in their mission and devoid of a defined military success. It is hard to imagine what would constitute a success in military terms. As the past couple of years have shown, even an effective strike on the leadership of the main insurgent groups is not a great success. For the war continues unabated, despite the insurgents experiencing a number of casualties,

which theoretically should weaken their capabilities. Thus, it seems success should be defined as when Afghan forces are able independently to fight the insurgency. Hence, the establishment of a functioning and efficient Afghan National Police (ANP) and Army (ANA) constitutes two of the five pillars of security sector reform (SSR) in the country. In the first phase of the Afghan conflict, the ANP engaged Afghan militants. The ANP has its roots in private militias, which operated throughout Afghanistan. By the end of 2001, American Special Forces had already been training the militias, before handing over responsibility to the Afghan Ministry of Defense. The militias served as auxiliary forces for their American counterparts. Since the process of disarming the militias began in 2005, they have been offered employment in the ANP or ANA. Many attempts were made to reform the militia, however none were successful due to the paralysis of the decision making process in the governing structure. While the ANA has largely been built from scratch, there were some paramilitary forces still operating in Afghanistan, which were formally under the control of the Ministry of Defense. In reality however, the central government exercised little control over many of them. As a result, many pursued the interests of local authorities. In 2003-2006 the paramilitary forces were seen as a direct threat to the central government. Nonetheless, due to widespread insurgent activity and a shortage of Afghan troops in

2006, the government was forced to again align with these private paramilitary forces in order to fight the insurgents. A formal decision authorizing the creation or use of these paramilitary forces against the insurgents has never been taken in Kabul. Nonetheless, many of them act on behalf of the central government, particularly in the south of the country. In the short-term, it appears unlikely, if at all possible that Afghan security forces will be able, independently to deliver internal security. Thus, we can assume that this scenario has little chance of success.

3. NEAR-TERM U.S., COALITION AND NATO WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

The next scenario relates to the potential withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan in the near-term. For the purposes of this analysis, it is assumed that a 'near-term' withdrawal is one which occurs precipitously inside of a couple of years. Thus, the political and military situation is not too dissimilar than that at the time of writing. With regards to this scenario, there are a number of factors to consider.

First, we must presume that Afghan security forces would assume responsibility for fighting the insurgents. It should also be presumed that in announcing a fixed date for withdrawal, insurgent activity would likely intensify. With this in mind, how would Afghan security forces perform? In all probability,

an intensification of insurgent activity would likely lead to the disintegration of Afghan security forces, thereby strengthening private paramilitary forces. Due to the weakening of central structures, in some areas of the country local alliances could be formed, which could serve to supply stability in those areas in the short-term. In this situation, the militias may receive illegal financing from internal as well as external actors. We should also assume that in the event of an internal withdrawal, the central government in Kabul would receive additional funds to pay off particular militias. While this may serve to stabilize the country, it may also serve to weaken state structures. Thus, in the short-term, this would strengthen 'informal state structures' in many provinces, especially in those where tribal structures remain. In the absence of security sector institutions, traditional institutions would emerge, operating contrary to universally accepted ideas of human rights. As a result, different groups and organizations could use this, to pressure the local authorities. The international community would also likely react to the disregard for human rights through pressurizing the central government, despite Kabul having limited means to pressure the respective local authorities. In the long-term, this could result in a total loss of government control in the provinces, as well as power-struggles in the capital city.

The second factor that will impact the country following a near-term withdrawal will be political. An important question here is whether the government in Kabul, bereft of the support of international forces would be able to stay in power? Here it would also appear that the insurgent's offensive would be political in nature. It is also important to consider whether the withdrawal of international forces would divide the insurgents given that the presence of what are considered 'occupation forces' is an important factor unifying the Afghan insurgency. Therefore, if international forces withdrew, then a fragmentation of the insurgents would likely ensue. This will have a special impact on the political struggle in the countryside. Existing democratic rules could become a tool in the political struggle (for example, elections, which could possibly remain). It is highly likely that some may attempt to restrict the access to power to those considered unfavorable to the government. In such circumstances, the former opponents could become a defender of democracy. Nonetheless, their disintegration will weaken them and probably impede them from assuming power in Afghanistan. In this case, it is likely that multiple actions in different parts of the country would serve to destabilize the central government. At the same time, a fight that has up until now been between paramilitary forces aligned to the government and the insurgents may proliferate into

multiple local conflicts, limited to certain areas.

It also appears likely, that the destabilization of Afghanistan, which, bearing in mind the above appears likely, would subsequently lead to the reunification of the conservative movement, just as it did during the creation of the Taliban movement. The lack of security and an efficient, fully functioning public administration would evidence the failure of the 'Western' way of ruling the country. Thus, the main banner, under which many different factions would unite, would be a complete subordination to Sharia. The lack of rules (often known as a 'Fetne'), coupled with a state that is in a phase of transition, of which the 1990s and the internal fighting among the mujahedeen is a good example, would strengthen the conservative movement, which, as was already mentioned, has in both Afghanistan and Pakistan a long tradition of mobilization of the masses against 'the injustice'.

4. CONCLUSION

In both of the scenarios discussed above, it would appear extremely likely that the conservative movement will return to power in Afghanistan. All that is left therefore is when and how this will happen? Also, a postponed withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan appears the more likely of the two scenarios. Military success is extremely

hard to achieve, if at all possible. Nonetheless, we have to consider the political situation of the government in Kabul following a military success. It is doubtful if the international forces in Afghanistan can succeed in the fight for Afghan souls and minds. Further, we should even ask ourselves whether the military goals that NATO has set for itself are in fact achievable.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned scenarios, along with the ISAF tasks, which have been set for this mission, the most likely scenario seems to be an indefinite ISAF presence in Afghanistan. However, the goals will not be achieved for a long-time yet. The reform of the Afghan security sector, the execution of which seems to be a crucial component in the functioning of the Kabul government, is still during the process of implementation.

Bearing in mind that the current efforts at creating an independent and fully functioning ANA and ANP are not bearing results, international forces are not in a position to withdraw. The question of security seems to be a key problem for continued operations in this country.

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2. FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The second half of this report examines the conflict in Afghanistan from a regional perspective. Specifically, it endeavors to determine which of three future scenarios would best serve the interests of the regions main actors. Here, the aim is to give greater clarity to the regional forces at play. The three scenarios under discussion are as follows:

SCENARIO ONE: THE U.S., THE COALITION AND NATO REMAIN IN AFGHANISTAN INDEFINATELY, BUT FAIL TO CURB THE INSURGENCY. THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT (GIRoA) REMAINS WEAK. BOTH THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY (ANA) AND POLICE (ANP) ARE INADEQUATELY TRAINED AND EQUIPPED, THUS THEY ARE UNABLE TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECURING THE COUNTRY INDEPENDANTLY. THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND IS SIMILAR TO THAT AT THE TIME OF WRITING IN LATE 2009.

SCENARIO TWO: THE U.S., THE COALITION AND NATO WITHDRAW PRECIPITOUSLY, HAVING FAILED TO CURB THE INSURGENCY. THE GIRoA

REMAINS WEAK. BOTH THE ANA AND ANP ARE INADEQUATELY TRAINED AND EQUIPPED, THUS THEY ARE UNABLE TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECURING THE COUNTRY INDEPENDANTLY. THERE IS THE STRONG POSSIBILITY THAT THE TALIBAN WILL RETURN TO POWER.

SCENARIO THREE: THE U.S., THE COALITION AND NATO WITHDRAW, HAVING ACHIEVED THEIR RESPECTIVE GOALS AND STABILIZED AFGHANISTAN. THE GIRoA IS RELATIVELY STRONG. BOTH THE ANA AND ANP ARE ADEQUATELY TRAINED AND EQUIPPED. THUS, THEY ARE ABLE TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECURING THE COUNTRY EITHER INDEPENDANTLY OR WITH LIMITED FOREIGN ASSISTANCE. FOREIGN ADVISORS AND A LIMITED NUMBER OF TROOPS STAY ON, THE LATTER AS INSURANCE FOR THE ANA AND ANP. THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN IS SIMILAR TO THAT OF 1978, BEFORE THE SOVIET INVASION.

The regional actors examined are Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Central Asia and China. Each of the following chapters is dedicated to a regional actor, in which the advantages and disadvantages of each of the three future scenarios for each actor is considered.

IRAN

As regards Afghanistan and NATO's presence in the country, Iranian interests (as they are seen by the current establishment) are playing an important role for three reasons. First, Iranian foreign policy is dominated by the issue of national and state security. Second, Iran has a very strong ideological character. It is an Islamic republic, whose vocation is the dissemination of Shiite Islam. Further, these two elements are unified by the quest to achieve a position of regional preponderance, which, of course would ensure security as well as enable Iran to protect and promote 'pure' Islam. Iranian politicians, along with a large percentage of Iranian society believe that regional preponderance is Iran's destiny, not only because of its size, some 75,000 million inhabitants and natural resources, but also because of the unique value of their civilization.

1. SCENARIO ONE

1.1. ADVANTAGES

This scenario may well be desirable for Iran. Tehran could use the insecurity in Afghanistan to satisfy its own interests in the country. First, a weak Afghan state is unlikely to become a U.S. ally against Iran. A continuing level of uncertainty in Afghanistan would keep the Americans bogged down. For Iran, 'controlled chaos' in Afghanistan better serves its interests

than the possibility of the country promoting ideological issues. While Sunni Wahhabists (i.e. the Taliban) oppose Iran, they are even greater opponents of the U.S. While Western forces contain the Taliban, Tehran can gradually expand its influence not only in the Afghan provinces that border Iran, but also in the Shiite Hazarajat region (see figure 1). Tehran is also effectively using the political turmoil in Afghanistan to install sympathizers in President Karzai's central and provincial administration. Over-time, this may reinforce the pro-Iranian lobby in Afghan state institutions. Afghanistan's western provinces are becoming more and more dependant on Iran. The Hazaras – an ethno-religious group based in central Afghanistan – are receiving special protection (along with financial, political, educational aid etc.), having been treated for decades as pariahs in their own country and are now entering the political scene (see figure 1). If this were to



FIGURE 1. (SELECTED) ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION IN AFGHANISTAN

continue it would likely consolidate Iranian influence in Afghanistan, while weakening Pakistan's position in the region, which is currently entangled in a struggle with the Taliban.

Second, chaos in Afghanistan makes the country dependant on external assistance. Not only does Iran invest money and know-how, but also political capital into the country. The first visit of the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Kabul in 2007 was staunchly opposed by the U.S. Nonetheless the Afghans looked upon the visit as an opportunity to further stabilize their country. Only two days after the Iranian elections held in June 2009, Afghan President Hamid Karzai called his Iranian counterpart to extend his congratulations. This underlines the strategic importance for Afghanistan of having good relations with Iran.¹ For Iran this is a desirable scenario. On the one hand, an indefinite U.S. and NATO presence would guarantee a minimal level of security in Afghanistan so as to develop infrastructure and fight opium production. While on the other hand, the presence of U.S. and NATO forces means that Iran does not have to exert military influence in the country to protect Shiite brothers and sisters, which might be

¹ Robert Tait, 'Ahmadinejad's first Afghan visit ruffles U.S. feathers', The Guardian, August 14, 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/aug/14/iran.afghanistan>

negatively received among some Afghans.

The lack of an Iranian military presence in Afghanistan, coupled with Iranian efforts to ensure employment for Afghans, improve their living conditions and shelter millions of refugees, while at the same time abstaining from religious agitation and respecting their values can serve to improve Iran's image in the country.

Instability in Afghanistan serves to destabilize the security situation in Pakistan. Not only are the military transports from the Pakistani port of Karachi exposed to terrorist attacks, but so too are civilian deliveries transiting Pakistan. This opened an opportunity for Teheran to offer an alternative transit corridor connecting Herat city, located in western Afghanistan with the Iranian port of Chabahar (see figure 2). Iranians, in cooperation with India, have invested in the construction of a good quality road,



decided not to impose transit fees on Afghan entrepreneurs using this connection and also created profitable customs conditions at the port premises. Further, they are planning to expand the road network to the North to connect it to the Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan transportation system.

Strategically, the most important point is that the U.S. and the West are illustrating their inability to solve Asian problems. The recurrence to martial methods imposed by the West appears to be counterproductive in Asia. Iranian slogans of Islamic justice and the right to self-determination become increasingly more attractive. Meanwhile the U.S.'s omnipotence is going to be compromised, even in such a peripheral state as Afghanistan.

Bogged down in Afghanistan, the U.S. and the West will have a much weaker hand on other issues of Iranian interests, such as the nuclear program or Western interference in domestic politics.

1.2. DISADVANTAGES

A prolonged NATO/ISAF presence in Afghanistan may result in the westernization of Afghanistan. Under international (Western) pressure several legal decisions based on Quranic rules have been canceled. At the London conference President Karzai reiterated his determination to observe human rights, including liberties relating to the position of women in Afghan society and politics. If

this trend continues and takes firmer roots, Afghanistan may start distancing itself from Iran as regards civilization proximity.

Continued instability in Afghanistan with a Western presence means the prolongation of American troops in close vicinity to Iranian borders. Americans will have more time to build up their bases to the East of Iran (see figure 3). Nevertheless, the U.S. has already built up its military infrastructure in Afghanistan to the extent that it provides the American's strategic control over neighbouring countries.



FIGURE 3. MAJOR U.S. AIR BASES IN AFGHANISTAN

2. SCENARIO TWO

2.1. ADVANTAGES

The main advantage is the defeat of the U.S. and the West in Asia.

We may speculate that the absence of NATO forces could open up

opportunities for Iran. Despite the return of the Taliban being highly likely, Iran may be able to influence the process in which Afghanistan is put straight. Iran could attempt to establish different coalitions in the Afghan government through subsidizing some formations and dispatching forces, which could aid the Afghan government's fight against the Taliban. However, the effectiveness of such measures is doubtful. The Pakistani establishment has a wider variety of instruments and measures to influence Pashtun leaders, who would probably assume control of major parts of Afghanistan's territory and dominate the country's political leadership.

2.2. DISADVANTAGES

We should assume that a NATO withdrawal would result in the Taliban returning to power. This could undermine a number of Iranian interests. The return of a Wahhabist state on Iran's borders would directly threaten the country's security. The success of this Islamic rite would offset any satisfaction Iran might have in seeing the West fail, especially the U.S. The return of a Wahhabist state would also serve to strengthen Sunni Islam within Iran (Baloch, Arabs, some of the Kurds), which could foster religious and ethnic unrest as well as the emergence of terrorist groups. It would also be impossible, or extremely difficult for Iran to protect the Shiite Hazaras in Afghanistan. Iran's main regional competitors – Pakistan and Saudi Arabia –

would acquire more influence in Afghanistan. Iran would also lose an important asset in its dialogue with the West, namely cooperation in Afghanistan.

If the Taliban did return to power or political chaos did engulf Afghanistan, then this would undermine Iranian political and economic interests. Teheran has invested considerable capital in the construction of transport corridors (i.e. the route between Bandar Abbas and Tashkent or Herat to Chabahar) used by Iranian companies as well as opened banks in Afghanistan (see figure 2). Iran has also been able to dominate the economies of Afghanistan's western provinces while being economically active in Kabul among other cities.

Further, chaos in Afghanistan would likely result in another wave of refugees arriving in Iran, which is significant given that the current rate of unemployment in the country is at an alarming level. Drug trafficking would also prove harder to fight as a result of weaker cooperation with Afghan authorities. Iran is perhaps the largest recipient of Afghan opium.

The fiasco of the NATO/ISAF mission does not have to mean that all American troops would leave Afghanistan. Probably the U.S. would make sure that some air bases be operative on Afghan territory. Thus, the encirclement of Iran by a chain of American military installations would not be broken.

3. SCENARIO THREE

In this scenario, we must assume that Afghan security forces are able either by themselves or with limited external assistance to curb the insurgency. Tasks have been divided appropriately and successfully between the authorities in Kabul and the provinces and to the satisfaction of most ethnic groups, clans and religious leaders (i.e. a situation in Afghanistan somewhat similar to that before 1978). The purchase of poppy by the state or by foreign pharmaceutical companies, along with the introduction of alternative cultivation limits drug production. Internal peace aids the clearance of mines, restores agriculture, trade and services. Foreign advisors remain in Afghanistan along with a limited number of troops, which act as insurance for the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Police (ANP).

3.1. ADVANTAGES

The stabilization of Afghanistan would help Iran to deal with two difficult social problems: drug addiction (of course not completely) and the two million Afghan refugees currently sheltering in the country. It would also aid the development of profitable economic cooperation with its eastern neighbours. Good diplomatic relations between Iran and Afghanistan would likely continue.

Good cooperation with Afghanistan and further assistance in stabilizing the country

would offer Iran leverage in dealing with the West in other important areas (e.g. the nuclear program, sanctions, Sunni terrorism).

Assuming that Iran is not going to change its international policy anytime soon, this scenario also contains some adverse elements.

3.2. DISADVANTAGES

It is hard to imagine that the authorities in Kabul would object to the U.S. maintaining its military bases in the country, mainly for the purpose of counteracting a resurgence of the aggressive Taliban movement in neighbouring Pakistan. Iran would, therefore, remain surrounded by 'the Great Satan'. Stabilization in Afghanistan requires the 'cleaning up' of the political situation in Pakistan and so, would strengthen an important regional competitor. In a stable Afghanistan, it would be much harder for Iran to play an influential political role, but rather one acting mainly backstage.

It must be remembered that in Iranian political discourse the security factor is paramount. From this perspective the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages.

4. CONCLUSION

An indefinite continuation of the status would best serve Iranian interests. Thus, the first scenario, namely an indefinite

U.S. and NATO presence would appear the most desirable for Iran. It would facilitate the peaceful growth of Iranian influence in Afghanistan to the detriment of Pakistan, strengthening Iran's position in the region. Further, Iran's role as the protector of Shiite Muslims would be solidified. Other interests may also be served, especially economical as Tehran increasingly aids the West.

As a result one can expect Iranian authorities to verbally support the prompt withdrawal of operation 'Enduring Freedom' and NATO forces from Afghanistan. However in reality they will strive to delay the withdrawal process and make it a thorny issue. At the same time, Iran will boost its contacts with both official Afghan authorities and insurgent groups in order to safeguard its interests in the period of phasing-out of Western missions.

It will be also reasonable to foresee a search of Iranian diplomacy for areas of cooperation with other regional players, having similar though not always overlapping interests, such as those of India and Russia.

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PAKISTAN

1. SCENARIO ONE

1.1. ADVANTAGES

It would be an understatement to say that relations between India and Pakistan have historically been poor. Since Britain relinquished its claim over the Indian subcontinent and partitioned its former colony into two states, India and Pakistan have fought three full-blown wars, two of which over Kashmir, a territory to which both lay claim. Still unresolved, the dispute ensures that relations remain ‘poor’ to this day. Against this backdrop, growing Indian influence in Afghanistan since the U.S.-led invasion of 2001 and the ousting of the Taliban regime that resulted is significant. India has reopened its embassy in Kabul and consulates in Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Jalalabad and Kandahar (see figure 4). Close to the Pakistan border, the latter have prompted accusations that India’s intelligence wing has been using them as cover to stir separatist sentiments among Pakistan’s restive Baloch. India has pledged \$1.2 billion USD for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, making it the sixth largest bilateral donor. Reconstruction projects have included the construction of the Zaranj to Delaram highway, which ostensibly marginalizes the Pakistani ports of Karachi and Gwadar (See figure 2). Personal contacts between New Delhi and Kabul have also benefited from the fact that many current Afghan

leaders – President Hamid Karzai among them – studied at Indian universities or were part of the Indian-backed Northern Alliance during Taliban rule. Not surprisingly then, Pakistan regards growing Indian influence in Afghanistan as hostile and part of an encirclement strategy, which also permits India to exploit the country’s ethnic fissures. The alleged Indian airbase at Farkhor, Tajikistan feeds Pakistan’s encirclement theory (see figure 4). While the continuation of the status quo would likely perpetuate this trend, the U.S. and NATO presence would at the same time prevent India (and any other regional competitor) from acquiring a preponderant position of influence in Afghanistan. Further, their presence reduces the likelihood of Pakistan having to fight a fourth full-blown war against India, as this would clearly undermine U.S. and NATO interests in Afghanistan.



A continuation of the status quo would also prolong U.S. and NATO reliance on Pakistan, from which the country could extort benefits. During the Bush years, cooperation brought considerable economic benefits for Pakistan, especially the military, arguably bolstering the country's conventional defenses in the event of a war with India. Going forward, the greater emphasis is likely to be on the civilian, rather than the military level. Further, military assistance is likely to be focused more on the tools, training and support to fight the 'war on terror', rather than a conventional war with India.

A continuation of the conflict in Afghanistan would also ensure that the Afghan government, headed by Hamid Karzai, whose father incidentally favored a 'Pashtunistan' – an ethno-linguistic state that unites both sets of Pashtuns straddling the 'Durand line' – would be in no position to stir separatist sentiments among the millions of ethno-linguistic Pashtuns in Pakistan.

1.2. DISADVANTAGES

As Pashtun and Baloch ethno-linguistic groups straddle the 2,640km long 'Durand line', the situation in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan will always directly impact adjacent areas in Pakistan (see figure 5). Thus, the continuation of the status quo and the failure of U.S. and NATO troops to quell insurgent activity in the south and east of the country would feed the forces of militancy in

Pakistan. Currently the militancy undermines the writ of the Pakistani state and threatens its viability. Instability at home would continue to weaken Pakistan regionally as well as distract the military from its eastern border with India.



The failure of U.S. and NATO forces to quell insurgent activity would also undermine Pakistan's interests in Central Asia. Pakistan wants to develop commercial and communication linkages to Central Asia as well as become an energy export corridor for the regions resources. The deep-water port at Gwadar, which is situated on the Balochistan coast, has been built with this in mind. So too has the proposed road and rail network linking the port to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

As the war in Afghanistan wears on, Pakistan is likely to come under increasing pressure from a frustrated U.S. and NATO. Also, unilateral strikes from U.S. UAVs on

targets holed up on Pakistan territory are likely to continue and may even be broadened to include Balochistan province. However, such strikes reportedly receive Pakistani consent and further, Washington has to tread a fine line, as any acts considered hostile could ultimately prove self-defeating.

A prolonged conflict in Afghanistan could increase cooperation and collaboration among ethno-linguistic Pashtuns straddling the 'Durand line' as well as resentment for the Pakistani state. This could serve to foster separatist sentiments.

2. SCENARIO TWO

2.1. ADVANTAGES

If a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal were to follow a power-sharing agreement between the Karzai government and moderate Taliban, then this could be advantageous for Pakistan. Not only would the Taliban presence likely offset any ethno-nationalist impulses in the Karzai government, but also limit Indian influence. Further, an agreement may serve to stabilize Afghanistan and in turn, Pakistan. However, this is highly unlikely. First, the Taliban claim there are no 'moderates' among them and second, why would the Taliban – moderates or not – negotiate from what would appear to be a position of strength.

It is also possible, that a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal would culminate in the fall of the Karzai government and

the return to power of the Taliban. Certainly, an orphaned Karzai regime would prove an easier target, than when fortified by some 135,000 U.S. and NATO troops. This would also bring benefits for Pakistan. Firstly, under Taliban rule India's influence in Afghanistan would decline. Secondly, Afghanistan would likely become home to a whole host of Islamic extremist groups bent on terrorizing India. On the other hand, this could also serve to strain Pakistan's relations with India and bring the two closer to a full-blown war.

2.2. DISADVANTAGES

A precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal would likely serve to destabilize Pakistan, but to a much greater extent than in the first scenario. In the absence of some 135,000 U.S. and NATO troops the country would likely descend into chaos, which in turn would fuel the forces of militancy in Pakistan. In fact, their withdrawal may even serve to embolden the Pakistani militants as well as insurgents operating in Afghanistan, amplifying the threat to the Pakistani state. While instability at home would weaken Pakistan regionally, chaos in Afghanistan would also undermine Pakistan's interests in Central Asia.

With a U.S. and NATO withdrawal on the horizon, a weak, Karzai government bereft of the security forces to quell the insurgency would likely consolidate ties with India, who it considers one of its closet allies. India would have an

immediate interest in buttressing the regime. If the Karzai regime were to fall, Afghanistan would shelter Islamic extremist groups bent on terrorizing the country. Thus, it is possible, that a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal would result in India acquiring a position of influence in Kabul. This would be disastrous for Pakistan. It would mean defacto Indian encirclement and permit India to exploit Pakistan's ethnic fissures. In response, Pakistan would consider countermeasures, not excluding support of the Afghan insurgents, most likely the Taliban. A war by proxy would likely be the result, which would be potentially destabilizing for relations between India and Pakistan as well as the entire region.

As noted above, there is also the possibility that a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal would culminate in the fall of the Karzai regime and the return to power of the Taliban. While this would bring benefits for Pakistan, it could also have some disastrous consequences. Similar to 1996-2001, the Taliban's Pashtun ethnic identity would likely preclude them from extending their influence beyond the southern and eastern regions of the country (see figure 5). Consequently, Afghanistan would likely fracture along ethnic lines, which could serve to stir separatist sentiments among the millions of ethnic Pashtuns in Pakistan, thereby threatening the integrity of the Pakistani state. Of course, Pakistan would hope that in its likely support

of the Taliban, who are ideologically, rather than ethnically motivated Pashtun nationalism would be suppressed in favour of an Islamic identity. Yet a 'Pashtunistan', with a distinct Islamic flavour is not inconceivable, especially when one considers the current cooperation and collaboration among Pashtun and Islamic elements straddling the 'Durand line'.² Other consequences would include a large number of Afghan refugees crossing the porous border into Pakistan. Afghan drugs and weapons would likely follow. Besides the obvious strain on Pakistani infrastructure as well as social problems, drug revenue could be used to help fund the militancy, while greater access to weaponry could help arm the militants. The militants could also use Afghanistan as a base to plan and execute further attacks inside Pakistan.

3. SCENARIO THREE

3.1. ADVANTAGES

In quelling the insurgency and stabilizing Afghanistan, it is likely, though not guaranteed that stability would return to Pakistan. If this is the case, then it follows that the militancy would no longer undermine the writ of the Pakistani state and threaten its viability. While stability at home would strengthen Pakistan regionally and allow the military to

² Selig S. Harrison, 'The Pashtun time bomb', The New York Times, August 1, 2007
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/01/opinion/01iht-edharrison.1.6936601.html?_r=1

redirect its attention towards the eastern border with India, stability in Afghanistan would also serve Pakistan's interests in Central Asia, from which the country stands to benefit economically. However, it is important to recognize that regional competition is now fierce – the Indian-built Zaranj to Delaram highway and Iranian port of Chabahar offering a good example (see figure 2) – and periodic unrest in Balochistan province may serve to undermine these opportunities.

Assuming that the process of stabilizing Afghanistan also succeeds in unifying the country, then this would be beneficial for Pakistan. A united Afghanistan would likely serve to suppress separatist sentiments among Pakistan's restive Pashtun and Baloch populations.

3.2. DISADVANTAGES

Considering the current growth of Indian influence in Afghanistan, it is likely that if the U.S. and NATO succeeded in stabilizing the country and then, subsequently withdrew, India would acquire a preponderant position of influence in Afghanistan (though India would face stiff competition from China). For Pakistan this would mean defacto Indian encirclement and the possibility of a two-front war against an Indian-Afghan axis. Effective Afghan security forces could augment this threat.

A stronger Karzai government would be in a better position to resist subordination to Pakistan, especially if backed by India. A

Karzai government confident in the cohesion of its own state may also increasingly play the 'Pashtunistan' card, while India could also leverage its influence in Afghanistan by exploiting Pakistan's ethnic fissures. If defeating the Afghan insurgency, including the Taliban is a prerequisite to the U.S. and NATO stabilizing Afghanistan, then Pakistan's ability to counter such threats and project influence into the country would be limited.

A U.S. and NATO success in Afghanistan would reduce Washington's reliance on Pakistan with the prospect of U.S. aid and attention falling accordingly, though the U.S. appears to have learnt their lesson. Another consequence may be increased U.S. cooperation with India, especially as Washington looks to forestall China becoming the dominant power in Asia. Nonetheless, it should be noted that since 2001 U.S.-India relations have warmed regardless.

A sub-scenario worth considering is if the U.S. and NATO succeeded in stabilizing Afghanistan, but then the former (it is highly unlikely that NATO troops would stay on) only marginally withdrew. Theoretically, the continued U.S. presence would preclude India (and any other regional actor) from acquiring a preponderant position of influence in the country; while at the same time offer Pakistan all the benefits of stability in Afghanistan. However, this would meet considerable resistance from Russia, China

and Iran. Wanting to forestall Chinese dominance in Asia, it is more likely that the U.S. would want India to take its place though Washington would have to be careful not to alienate Pakistan. Perhaps most of all, it appears increasingly unlikely that the U.S. and NATO will succeed in stabilizing the country in the first place.

4. CONCLUSION

Short of normalization with India, none of the three scenarios under discussion would likely reconcile Pakistan's desired end-state, that of a stable and unified Afghanistan, with a Pakistan-friendly government in Kabul. All three scenarios could conceivably increase Indian influence in the country, which Pakistan regards as hostile, while only the third scenario, the scenario in which Afghanistan is likely to appear most hostile would bear stability and unity. Further, a hostile Afghanistan would only serve to undermine Pakistan's interest in a stable and unified country. Most would agree that Pakistan considers India to be its prime concern. Thus, in determining, which of the three scenarios would be the best of a bad set of options for Pakistan, it is instructive to do the same.

In this regard, the first two scenarios stand out. Taking into consideration the respective disadvantages of each, the second scenario seems comparatively worse. While the continuation of the status quo would likely subvert stability and security in Pakistan, the impact is likely to

be greater if the U.S. and NATO were to precipitously withdraw. In the absence of U.S. and NATO forces it is likely that Afghanistan would not only descend into chaos, which would fuel the forces of militancy in Pakistan, but their withdrawal may even serve to embolden the militants. The militants could also use Afghanistan as a source of funding through the drug trade as well as a base to receive weapons and plan and execute further attacks inside Pakistan. The second scenario also raises the possibility of an ethnically fractured Afghanistan, which would threaten the integrity of the Pakistani state. Of the two scenarios then, the first would appear the better of the two, and the best of a bad set of options overall.

Alleged Pakistani support of the Afghan Taliban would appear to confirm this conclusion. While it serves as a hedge against Indian influence in Kabul and the associated consequences in the event of a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal, it also assures that the U.S. and NATO remain bogged down in the country. Of course, recent military action in Swat and South Waziristan appear to suggest that Pakistan is increasingly discarding this policy. However, the primary target of these actions was the so-called 'Pakistani' Taliban and not their Afghan counterparts. Further, as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry has noted, the Pakistan military action did not address the role of the Quetta Shura,

which has the most influence of the insurgency in southern Taliban strongholds or the Haqqani network, the most lethal killer of allied troops and Afghan civilians.³

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³ Eric Schmitt, 'U.S. Envoy's cables show worries on Afghan plans', The New York Times, January 25, 2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/26/world/asia/>

RUSSIA

1. SCENARIO ONE

1.1. ADVANTAGES

A protracted conflict in Afghanistan would consume U.S. and NATO attention as well as their forces, which has a number of advantages for Russia. First of all, this would distract their attention from other problems as well as limit their commitment to areas important to Russia (e.g. Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus). Also, this could serve to strengthen Russian leverage over the U.S. and NATO, given that Russia is one of a number of countries currently providing limited support to Afghanistan as well as international forces. Moscow could use this leverage to seek some concessions from the West in issues like European security (e.g. a guarantee against NATO enlargement, the strengthening of Russia's position in existing or new security institutions and limiting the level of military infrastructure in Eastern Europe etc.) and regional security in Central Asia (especially with regards to the establishment of NATO-CSTO (the Collective Security

Organization) cooperation and recognition of Russia as the dominant security actor in the region). Continuing instability in Afghanistan could also serve to foster closer security cooperation between Russia and the Central Asian

Republics (CARs) (especially among those bordering Afghanistan) as well as China, including the strengthening of the SCO (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and CSTO.

1.2. DISADVANTAGES

A continuing Western (especially American) military presence in Afghanistan and the surrounding areas would pose risks for Russia. It could serve to consolidate the independence of the CARs and encourage them to further diversify their international relations (largely at Russia's expense, as this would serve to weaken their relations with Russia). Central Asia as an important 'buffer zone' would still attract U.S. and other Western countries and would encourage the West to become involved in other areas (especially with regards to energy). A possible increase in the American presence could prompt China to counteract this through increasing its own presence in the region.

1.3. PREFERENCES

With all this in mind, it should be accepted that the most profitable scenario for Russia seems to be the preservation of the status quo in Afghanistan and the long-term Western presence in the country, on the condition that:

- ⇒ It would not involve a significant increase in the military presence of the West in Afghanistan and success in fighting the Taliban

- ⇒ It would not involve an increase in the West's presence (especially American) in Central Asia as well as an increase in cooperation between the West and the CARs
- ⇒ It would increase Russia's role in the Afghan operation, particularly through the development of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which supports the presence of international forces in Afghanistan as well as a significant increase in Russia's role in training and equipping the Afghan National Army (ANA) (financed by the West)
- ⇒ It would foster closer cooperation on security between Russia and the CARs and also give rise to the establishment of NATO-CSTO cooperation

The following facts seem to suggest that Russia favours this particular scenario. For example, Russia has raised the issue of its readiness to supply military resources to equip the ANA as well as discuss with the U.S. and NATO financing Russian support of the ANA. Also, Russia has renewed its offer of CSTO cooperation with NATO.

2. SCENARIO TWO

2.1. ADVANTAGES

The political (and military) failure of the West in the form of a withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan, culminating in the gradual transition to

power of the Taliban (it seems that this would eventually occur, independent from the shape of any possible inter-afghan political agreement) would not only serve to discourage Western countries from becoming involved (especially militarily) in Central and East-Central Asia, but also in other areas important to Russia (e.g. Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus). The inevitable intra-coalition conflicts that would accompany a withdrawal could bring about the internal division and possible marginalization of NATO as well as serve to strain transatlantic relations. This, of course, would be in Russia's interest.

Another possible scenario to consider here would be the creation of a 'cordon sanitaire' of some sorts. Bearing in mind its potential, Russia would be a very desirable partner and a key country in securing Afghanistan's northern border. This could foster closer bilateral as well as multilateral cooperation between Russia and the CARs (who would be anxious, bearing in mind the threat a Taliban state in Afghanistan would pose) as well as increase Russia's military presence in the region. If the CARs were to resist, then Russia could coerce them through limited informal cooperation with the Taliban. This could serve to augment the threat posed by armed Islamic groups in Central Asia.

2.2. DISADVANTAGES

Having said all that, the return of a Taliban state in Afghanistan would take us back to

the year 2000. This would give Russia good reason to be fearful of Islamic extremism being exported not only to Central Asia but also inside its own borders (especially, the North Caucasus).

The illegal drugs trade would also increase, which would have serious repercussions for Russia. Moreover, the creation of a 'cordon sanitaire' around Afghanistan, as mentioned above could encourage the U.S. amongst others to preserve or even increase their military presence in Central Asia. Here, the West could gradually supplant Russia as the main guarantor of security in the region. This would likely prompt China to increase its presence in Central Asia. The creation of a 'cordon sanitaire' would also motivate the West to seek a modus vivendi with Iran. The latter could threaten Russian interests.

2.3. PREFERENCES

A precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal, after having handed over the responsibility for fighting the Taliban to Afghan security forces or after having drawn up a quick inter-Afghan political settlement, culminating in the return of the Taliban to power (both would, one way or another result in the Taliban assuming power in Kabul) appears to be less attractive for Russia, but acceptable on the condition that:

⇒ The Taliban government would not support or encourage actions by

radical extremists in Central Asia and the North Caucasus against Russia and its forces

⇒ Faced with the threat of cross-border activities carried out by armed radical Islamists, the CARs seek closer cooperation with Russia, rather than Western countries or even China, thereby limiting the West's (mainly American) military presence in Central Asia as well as forestalling the potential appearance of Chinese forces.

Evidence suggesting that Russia may favour this scenario can be found in the sudden surge in activity in 2009 by armed radical Islamists from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the associated Islamic Union of Jihad (IUJ) (there is evidence illustrating past Russian support of the IMU) in Central Asia (mainly, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) and northern Afghanistan.

3. SCENARIO THREE

Moscow does not consider this scenario a possibility. Nonetheless, in theory, a scenario whereby an increased military commitment from the West, alongside political activities, which would promote stability in Afghanistan would be the worst-case scenario for Russia. Of course, a stabilized Afghanistan may open up opportunities for Russia, not least economical as well as strengthen relations with China. It would also decrease

the potential threat of Taliban support for radical Islam in Russia, especially in the North Caucasus as well as decrease the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan to and through Russia, which currently brings substantial social problems to the country.

Nonetheless, these benefits by no means outweigh the fact that a stabilized Afghanistan would demonstrate the West's ability to act as a guarantor of security in the region. Also, success would likely preserve a Western presence in Afghanistan as well as Central Asia and consolidate the West's ties with the CARs and Afghanistan, including in the field of security, which, of course, would dilute Russia's importance in the region.

4. WHAT RESPONSE?

The above demonstrates that Moscow is facing difficult decisions as regards its strategy for Afghanistan. It is not quite clear which option Moscow prefers. As a result, it does not have a coherent and consequent strategy at present. It is not inconceivable to think that the governing elite in Russia are divided over the issue (if that is indeed the case, the elite are probably drawn between support of those formerly of the Northern Alliance or President Karzai, as well as between those who favour greater support of the international forces in Afghanistan or 'armed neutrality' and maybe even those in favour of a tactical alliance with the Taliban).

An analysis of the situation seems to suggest that Russia's strategy for Afghanistan will be a flexible one, responsive to developments at both the local and international level.

As a result, it seems that Russia will, for the time being at least maintain or even increase its level of support for the Afghan government as well as international forces. This includes the delivery of military equipment for the ANA and some further facilitation for military transit to Afghanistan. However, Moscow would expect some financial as well as political (especially in terms of NATO-CSTO relations) benefits in return.

If the security situation in Afghanistan was to worsen, it is unlikely, though not improbable that Russia would engage militarily in Afghanistan (either by sending Russian or 'CSTO' troops). If Moscow, for any reason (e.g. wide-ranging political concessions from the West or considering the situation in Afghanistan a direct security threat) thought this to be possible, it would likely pursue a strategy, in which it would assume control over northern Afghanistan (north of the Hindu Kush), thereby creating a Russian protectorate, which would act as buffer zone.

If international forces were to withdraw from Afghanistan, it is highly likely that Russia would engage in pre-emptive talks with the Taliban, with the aim of receiving assurances that the new government in Kabul would respect Russia's interests in

Central Asia. If the Taliban were to assume control throughout Afghanistan, Russia would likely create a double 'security belt' around the country: first, along Afghanistan's border with the CARs (including attempts at infiltrating areas in northern Afghanistan) and second, along its own border with Kazakhstan. Moscow would put pressure on the CARs to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation, especially in the field of security as well as to allow Russia to increase its military presence in the region. Here, we can't exclude the possibility of limited cooperation with China. If the CARs were to resist or even allow the West to increase its military presence in the region, informal cooperation between Russia and the Taliban for purposes of inciting instability in one or more of the CARs is not out of the question.

5. CONCLUSION

The best scenario for Russia would be the continuing presence of NATO and U.S. troops in Afghanistan provided it does not lead to a political and military success in the country as well as growing Western presence in Central Asia. The scenario of collective withdrawal of NATO and U.S. troops from Afghanistan is less attractive for Russia, but still Moscow can draw benefits from it. The worst-case scenario for Russia is a permanent Western presence both in Afghanistan and in Central Asia leading to the stabilization of the security situation and attaching them stronger to the West.

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CENTRAL ASIA

1. SCENARIO ONE

1.1. ADVANTAGES

Both the U.S.-led operation 'Enduring Freedom' (OEF) and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan have significantly altered the dynamics in Central Asia.

The overthrow of the Taliban regime, the end of hostilities in northern Afghanistan and the pressure placed on al Qaida, especially in the areas that border the region have revised the security architecture in Central Asia and reduced the threat of Islamic extremism destabilizing the region. With the arrival of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, the greatest threat to Central Asia has been removed. An indefinite U.S. and NATO presence would therefore be beneficial for Central Asia, as this would ensure a degree of security and stability in bordering Afghanistan.

Since the launch of OEF in 2001, the geopolitical significance of Central Asia has risen dramatically. The region has become increasingly important to U.S. and NATO efforts in bordering Afghanistan, especially in terms of logistical support – airbases, supply routes etc (see figure 6). To date, this has been extremely advantageous. Cooperation with the U.S. and NATO has informally legitimized and empowered the Central Asian Republics (CARs) as well

as brought considerable economic benefits. All of this has served to strengthen the process of transformation and state building in Central Asia.



Cooperation with the West has also generated interest in investment from Western companies and afforded the CARs greater access to financial support. The arrival of U.S. and NATO troops in the region has also resulted in a significant number of programs, which have aided their own defensive capability. An indefinite U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan would likely sustain, if not increase their geo-political importance, from which the CARs would benefit.

An indefinite U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan would continue to challenge Russia's monopoly over Central Asia, especially in terms of security. An indefinite U.S. and NATO presence would weaken Russia's influence in

the region. At the same time it could provide the CARs with political and economical cooperation with other global players. They could use cooperation with the West or other global players as a bargaining chip, when negotiating with Moscow in order to increase their gain. Here, the announced closure of the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan earlier this year is case in point.

In short, the U.S. and NATO-led operations in Afghanistan over the past few years have been unusually beneficial for the CARs. The presence of U.S. and NATO troops has reduced the threat from the Taliban and al-Qaida, improved the regions presence on the international stage and brought political and economic benefits as well as strengthened their position towards Russia. Further, the prospect of a stable Afghanistan has revived a number of projects, which aim to connect Afghanistan with its neighbors, as well as provide the countries of South Asia access to Central Asia (see figure 2).

1.2. DISADVANTAGES

While an indefinite U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan would ensure a degree of security and stability in bordering Afghanistan, their presence precedes instability in those same areas. Instability in Afghanistan will affect stability in Central Asia. Further, the continuation of the conflict and the escalation of U.S. and NATO operations along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border could force

elements of the Taliban and Islamic extremist groups associated with al Qaida e.g. the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to relocate closer to Central Asia. A recent upsurge in extremist activity in the region suggests that this is increasingly the case.

Cooperation with the West also has its risks. U.S. and NATO supplies transiting Central Asia could increasingly become a target for the Taliban or al Qaida, or even both. Through political cooperation with the U.S. and NATO along with the reduced security threat emanating from Afghanistan, the CARs have acquired a greater degree of independence from Russia. This has and will continue to test Moscow's patience. Russia is currently concerned by the rise in Western activity in Central Asia as well as other areas of the CIS, illustrated during the Georgia – Russia war of 2008.

2. SCENARIO TWO

2.1. DISADVANTAGES

The stability and security of Central Asia is directly connected to the basic stabilization of Afghanistan. If the situation in Afghanistan was to deteriorate, which a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal would foresee then Central Asia should expect all the negative consequences of the 1990s i.e. the threat of Islamic extremism destabilizing the region, a war by proxy, which would strain regional relations and problems associated with

Afghan drugs. In this situation, the IMU may attempt to relocate to Central Asia. It should also be assumed that after years of waging Jihad on the Afghanistan and Pakistan border, the potential of the organization has significantly increased compared with the years 1999-2000. An increase in terrorist activity in the region could also prompt hysterical reactions from the CARs. This could include the violent repression of the threat, which could further feed the war and exacerbate relations among the CARs themselves (it is almost certain that in this situation, Uzbekistan would pressure and threaten intervention in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Tashkent has accused both of incompetence when it comes to tackling Islamic extremism). This, of course would be disastrous for Central Asia. Worst still, Russia, who wants greater control over the region would use this as an excuse to increase its presence and its active engagement in the pacification of the threat. This would come at the expense of the increasing independence of Central Asia. In the 1990s Moscow's main aim was to use the threat to subordinate the CARs. Thus, the threat posed by Islamic extremism (not its elimination) would serve Russian interests.

A particularly negative scenario for Central Asia would be a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal, having failed to curb the insurgency and stabilize Afghanistan. The aforementioned risks, coupled with an increase in instability in Afghanistan

would have a greater impact on the region. A precipitous withdrawal would not only leave an unstable Afghanistan, but also reduce their geo-strategic dependence on Central Asia. Thus, the U.S. and NATO would cease to involve themselves in issues of security and further, political and economic business in the region.

A precipitous withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces would also mean the region's complete subordination to Russia, to whom the only alternative would be China.

3. SCENARIO THREE

3.1. ADVANTAGES

Assuming an efficient U.S. and NATO policy in the region, Russian cooperation and the stabilization of the situation in Pakistan, this scenario would without doubt be the most desirable for the CARs. It would provide an opportunity to both strengthen and deepen all the benefits the region has gained in recent years i.e. the reduced threat of Islamic extremism (it appears that without a conducive environment in Afghanistan, local extremist groups do not pose a significant threat to the region); a reduction in the need for security in the region, which facilitates Russian hegemony; the strengthening and deepening of both political and economical ties with the West as well as (and possibly to a greater extent) the countries of South Asia, South-East Asia and the Middle East. Here, we should

also recall the multiple projects connecting Central Asia with the wider region as well as the Indian Ocean, all of which hinge on a stable Afghanistan. Although not yet executed, the most ambitious project is the Trans-Afghan pipeline, which would run from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India after having transited Afghanistan (see figure 7). It should also be said that for the CARs, who are surrounded by regional and global superpowers (Russia, China, and Iran) and divided geographically from the Caucasus and Europe (the Caspian Sea) as well as Pakistan and India (the Pamir Mountains), Afghanistan is the only country, for which they can – in terms of its stabilization – formulate an active, independent and positive policy.

stable Afghanistan would allow them to both strengthen and deepen all of the benefits they have gained in recent years. The worst scenario, of course would be the second scenario, namely a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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4. CONCLUSION

The third scenario, namely the stabilization of Afghanistan would be the most desirable for Central Asia. A relatively

CHINA

1. SCENARIO ONE

1.1. ADVANTAGES

An indefinite continuation of the conflict would continue to keep the U.S. and NATO bogged down militarily, while at the same time strain relations within the transatlantic alliance and raise doubts among some allies over the viability of 'out-of-area' operations.

U.S. and NATO efforts to stabilize Afghanistan have, thus far enabled China to pursue its commercial and economic interests in the country. Two years ago, China bid more than \$3.4 billion USD for the rights to mine copper – an estimated 240 million tons of material at 2.3% Cu – from a deposit close to the village of Aynak, some 30km southeast of the capital, Kabul.⁴ The bid also included a promise to invest hundreds of millions more in associated infrastructure projects.⁵ The investment is the single largest in Afghan history and establishes Beijing as the Afghan government's pre-eminent business partner and single largest source of tax payments.⁶ The investment is arguably part of Beijing's strategy to increase its influence in the economies

of Central and South Asia and undoubtedly, affords Beijing considerable leverage in Kabul. China also covets control over the estimated 60 billion tons of iron ore at Hajigak, for which international tenders will be considered later this year.⁷ In the long-term, Beijing sees Afghanistan as a new 'Silk Road' i.e. Afghanistan could provide greater access to Pakistan and the Indian Ocean via the ports at Gwadar and Chabahar as well as the Middle East (see figure 2). An indefinite U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan would arguably secure the Aynak investment as well as pave the way for further investment in the future. Of course, such investments cannot realize their full potential until Afghanistan is stable and secure.

While U.S. and NATO forces currently appear unable to curb the Afghan insurgency, their continued presence would preclude the return of the Taliban, which benefits Chinese national security. Home to the Muslim Uyghur, Xinjiang province in Western China shares a 76km long border with Afghanistan. During the Taliban interregnum, Uyghur militants with national ambitions used Afghanistan as a base to receive training and weapons as well as plan and execute militant attacks on Chinese authorities in Xinjiang.⁸ Further, they used Afghanistan

⁴ Michael Wines, 'China willing to spend big on Afghan commerce', The New York Times, December 29, 2009.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/30/world/asia/30mine.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&partner=rss&emc=rss

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ Ahmed Rashid, 'China forced to expand role in Central Asia', The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst, July 19, 2000
<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/290>

as a source of funding through the opium trade.⁹ Uyghur militants were also known to have ties to and receive support from Osama bin Laden and the al Qaida network.¹⁰ The removal of the Taliban regime and the prospect of a stable Afghanistan was, therefore a decisive factor in Beijing consenting to the U.S.-led invasion of 2001. The U.S.-led 'Global War on Terror' also provided Beijing with the political coverage to crackdown on the Uyghur militancy.

1.2. DISADVANTAGES

China would continue to be uncomfortable with the presence of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Understandably, China has reservations about the some 135,000 U.S. and NATO troops camped in close proximity (see figure 3). Though highly unlikely, this number could still climb.

China is increasingly concerned by the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, especially in view of the recent riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang and October's video, in which a senior Pakistan-based al Qaida figure, Abu Yahya al-Libi urges a holy war in Xinjiang. Clearly, the threat to Chinese national security is starting to expand beyond the Uyghur.¹¹ China is also increasingly concerned by the escalating

violence in Pakistan, with whom it shares an 'all-weather friendship', founded on mutual animosity for India. In short, Pakistan acts as a counterweight to India, which serves to divert the attention of the Indian military from the country's disputed border with China, over which they came to blows in 1962. As Pashtun and Baloch ethno-linguistic groups straddle the 2,640km long 'Durand line', the situation in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan will always directly impact adjacent areas in Pakistan. Thus, an indefinite U.S. and NATO presence in the country, while failing to curb insurgent activity in the south and east would continue to feed the forces of militancy in Pakistan, thereby weakening China's counterweight. Continued instability in Pakistan would also upset economic ties and China's commercial interests in the country. China would like to secure the safe transit of strategic resources through Pakistan from the country's port at Gwadar, part funded by Chinese Yuan (see figure 2).

Since the U.S.-led invasion of 2001 and the ousting of the Taliban regime that resulted, Indian influence in Afghanistan has soared. Thus, it seems sensible to assume that if the U.S. and NATO were to remain in Afghanistan indefinitely this trend would continue. Beijing views growing Indian influence in Afghanistan with suspicion as it poses a threat to

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Ahmed Rashid, 'The Taliban: Exporting Extremism', Foreign Affairs, November/December 1999/2000
<http://www.ratical.com/ratville/CAH/Rashid99.html>

¹¹ Andrew Small, 'Afghanistan-Pakistan: Bringing China (back) in', The German Marshall Fund Blog, Posted October 23, 2009

<http://blog.gmfus.org/2009/10/23/afghanistan-pakistan-bringing-china-back-in/>

China's regional aspirations, upsetting the balance of power between the two countries in Asia as well as weaken strategic partner Pakistan.

2. SCENARIO TWO

2.1. ADVANTAGES

For China, the obvious advantage of a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal would be the drawdown of U.S. and NATO troops currently camped in close proximity. Further, their withdrawal, having effectively been defeated by the Taliban would likely strain relations within NATO, thereby weakening the transatlantic alliance and leading some allies to question its future. It has often been said, that Afghanistan is a 'litmus test' for NATO.¹² Certainly, failure in Afghanistan would lead some allies to question the viability of 'out-of-area' operations or even rule them out altogether.

A precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal would also allay Chinese fears of U.S. encirclement. Many Chinese strategists openly worry about what they regard as the encirclement of China by U.S. military might in the wake of 9/11.¹³ With the U.S.

deploying troops in Afghanistan and Central Asia, selling sophisticated arms to Taiwan, helping modernize the Japanese military and enhancing military relations with the Philippines and Pakistan, China sees itself as geo-politically surrounded.¹⁴

Another advantage for China would be that the return of the Muslim Taliban would likely limit Hindu India's influence in Kabul. Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan would also likely become home to a number of Islamic extremist groups bent on terrorizing India. In response, New Delhi would have to expend great national energies confronting the threat; energies that could be better spent developing its economy and navy. A precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal could also potentially destabilize relations between India and Pakistan. Heightened tension between the two countries would also be in China's interest, as this would serve to distract the Indian military from the country's disputed border with China.

While these are all good reasons for China to welcome a U.S. and NATO withdrawal, the speed at which U.S. and NATO troops would be withdrawn is significant. If they were to do so precipitously, which this scenario suggests, then this would likely result in a security vacuum that neither China nor security forces favourable to Chinese interests would be able to fill. An article entitled 'Afghan peace needs a map'

¹² 'Afghanistan a 'litmus test' for NATO: Gates', The Dawn Newspaper, September 18, 2007
<http://www.dawn.com/2007/09/18/int7.htm>

¹³ Lawrence J. Korb, 'Does China's rapid military buildup threaten U.S. interests in East Asia', Council on Foreign Relations, August 5, 2002
http://www.cfr.org/publication/4675/does_chinas_rapid_military_buildup_threaten_us_interests_in_east_asia_no.html

¹⁴ *ibid*

published in the English language 'China Daily' in late September – incidentally, while U.S. strategy in Afghanistan was under review – seems to be aimed at prohibiting such an evolution of events.¹⁵ In the article, the credited author Qinggong Li, a senior Colonel in the People's Liberation Army of China and deputy Secretary General of the Chinese Research Council on National Security Policy calls for the U.S. to end its military action in Afghanistan. Significantly, Li proposes that a U.S. withdrawal occur in a manner agreed by the five members of the UN Security Council and, in the absence of U.S. troops an international peacekeeping mission be undertaken. In proposing such, China is clearly trying to gain greater influence over developments in a post-U.S. and NATO Afghanistan.

2.2. DISADVANTAGES

There are also a number of disadvantages to consider, most of which relate to the chaos that would ensue if U.S. and NATO troops precipitously withdrew. The subsequent instability and the likely return of the Taliban would undermine a number of Chinese interests. First, both would pose a threat to Chinese national security. As has already been noted, Uyghur militants used Taliban Afghanistan to promote their nationalist ambitions in

Xinjiang. Beijing knows, that to lose the latter would stroke similar sentiments among restive Tibetans and encourage Taiwan to declare official independence. Under Taliban rule, ties between the Uyghur militants and Osama bin Laden and the al Qaida network may also resume and even be reinforced. Also, Afghan opium would likely penetrate China, flooding Xinjiang. Besides the obvious social problems, revenue from the opium trade could be used to help fund the Uyghur militancy. Second, instability and the return of the Taliban would also endanger Chinese investments in Afghanistan (e.g. the Aynak mine) as well as thwart any future investment. Chinese plans to turn Afghanistan into a new 'Silk Road' would also be undermined. Beijing wants Chinese goods to travel from western China to the Pakistani seaport of Gwadar on the Indian Ocean with pipelines pumping oil and gas in the opposite direction. Access to natural resources overseas is essential if China is to fuel its fast-growing economy and maintain its ascent to superpower status. Access to the Indian Ocean would also enable China to project influence into a strategic shipping lane (e.g. the Strait of Hormuz, through which 60% of China's imported oil flows).¹⁶ Of course, Beijing could always

¹⁵ Li Qinggong, 'Afghan peace needs a map', The China Daily, September 28, 2009
http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2009-09/28/content_8743470.htm

¹⁶ Thomas Adams and Arnav Manchanda, 'The Dragon in the Hindu-Kush: China's interests in Afghanistan', The Globe and Mail, April 20, 2009
<http://cda-cdai.ca/cda/commentary/afghanistan/the-dragon-in-the-hindu-kush-chinas-interests-in-afghanistan>

come to some arrangement with the Taliban, with whom it has never fully abandoned ties (with of course the aid of Pakistan, who is also said to have ties to the Taliban) in order to ensure the security of Chinese facilities and the safety of Chinese workers.

As has been noted in a previous chapter, a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan would likely serve to destabilize and therefore, weaken China's friend and counterweight to India, Pakistan. Instability could endanger the current regime and with it, the 'all-weather friendship' as well as the country's much-prized nukes. Loose Pakistani nukes would be a nightmare scenario for China.

3. SCENARIO THREE

3.1. ADVANTAGES

Success and a stable Afghanistan would have its benefits for China. For one, it would bolster Chinese national security. A Taliban-free Afghanistan with a relatively strong government in Kabul, backed by adequately trained and equipped security forces would offer limited support for Uyghur militants. Also, Islamic extremism would be less likely to destabilize Central Asia and with it, China's western flank, while defeat would likely weaken the extremists morale. A stable Afghanistan would also secure and enable China to realize the full potential of the Aynak mine as well as consider further investment.

Moreover, it would allow China to implement plans to develop Afghanistan into a new 'Silk Road', bringing with it the aforementioned benefits.

The process of stabilizing Afghanistan is likely, though not guaranteed to stabilize bordering Pakistan. Stability would likely safeguard the 'all-weather friendship' and secure Pakistan's nukes. A stronger Pakistan would also provide a better counterweight to India and distract the Indian military from the country's disputed border with China. Indian influence in Kabul would guarantee tension with Pakistan, which again would serve China's interest. Of course, China would be suspicious of Indian influence. However, it is likely that Beijing too, will enjoy a privileged position in Kabul, especially if it was to increase its stake in the country through further investment.

3.2. DISADVANTAGES

Success in stabilizing Afghanistan is likely to be followed by a drawdown of U.S. and NATO troops. However, a limited number are likely to remain and the U.S. is likely to retain access to its military bases, which would put China at unease given their close proximity (see figure 3). Any long-term U.S. and NATO presence, albeit small would certainly undermine China's regional as well as global aspirations and fuel Chinese fears of U.S. encirclement. Success could also serve to revive NATO and establish 'out-of-area' operations as

common practice. Though, it must be conceded that the Afghan experience is likely to have left some allies skeptical about contributing to similar operations in the future. Even so, NATO would certainly be in better shape than it is at present.

4. CONCLUSION

China is torn between two competing interests. On the one hand it would like to see Afghanistan stabilized. On the other hand it would like to see U.S. and NATO troops withdrawn as soon as possible. Neither the second nor third scenarios appear to reconcile these interests. While instability would likely follow a precipitous U.S. and NATO withdrawal, the stabilization of Afghanistan would likely result in a limited number of U.S. troops staying on. The first scenario, namely an indefinite continuation of the status quo, however, appears to offer China a good compromise. While a continuation of the status quo would keep the U.S. and NATO bogged down militarily, their presence would ensure a degree of security and stability in Afghanistan, which would serve Chinese national security (provided that the security situation in Afghanistan does not worsen), secure Chinese investments and allow Beijing to increase its political and economic influence in the country. Thus, of the three scenarios under discussion the first would appear the most desirable for China.

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CONCLUSION

Of the three scenarios discussed the first scenario then, namely the continuation of the status quo would appear to best serve the interests of the majority of the regional actors examined, specifically all but Central Asia. Thus, this leads to the conclusion that Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China, while willing to offer limited assistance, it is unlikely that they will do so to an extent that enables the U.S., the Coalition and NATO to withdraw from Afghanistan anytime soon.



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