

Afghan Peace Will Require a Neighborly Concert

At a time when concerted neighborly action for Afghanistan's future is desperately needed, achieving it seems less realistic than ever. The peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban will need time to generate lasting solutions. The US is withdrawing militarily – with or without an intra-Afghan peace deal – effectively removing the lid that limited the engagement of neighbors in the conflict. A peaceful Afghanistan carries promise for all neighbors, while continued war brings risks of escalation, even contagion of conflict. Neighbors seem to be preparing for continuing conflicts in Afghanistan rather than investing in a path to peace. Significant political will and courage is needed to overcome the logic wherein conflicts in the regions surrounding Afghanistan are projected onto that country.

Brief Points

- Neighbors' involvement in the Afghan wars has been a constant, driven primarily by perceived threats within each of the regional complexes surrounding Afghanistan.
- The US plans to withdraw its military from Afghanistan in 2021, following up on its February 2020 agreement with the Taliban.
- Talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban have yielded little substance and, at best, will need ample time to generate a sustainable peace.
- War intensity has escalated in Afghanistan and the Taliban is unwilling to commit to a ceasefire, thus crushing the hopes for a so-called Reduction in Violence.
- With the US withdrawing, there is a critical need for concerted action among Afghanistan's neighbors, and while the US may facilitate its emergence, it will not be there to sustain this action.

Introduction

The need for a concert, in which the countries of Afghanistan's wider neighborhood (Figure 1) commit to cooperate for a peaceful shift in Afghanistan – and abstaining from pursuing their narrower interests by backing their various proteges on the battleground – is indisputable. Much diplomatic energy has been invested in fostering platforms for such a concert. However, that need has become critical and the lack of a credible platform is conspicuous.

The investments in cooperative platforms – certainly those that have been supported by the US and its allies since 2001 – have been based on the assumption that Afghanistan is a connector between countries in Central Asia, South Asia, the Gulf region, as well as China and Russia. The promise of a peaceful Afghanistan as a connector is indisputable, and indeed tangible progress has been made, even in the midst of war.

The challenge is that the individual actors in the Afghan region are each characterized by their own internal disconnectedness, which is projected onto Afghanistan, casting the country into the role of a hosting ground for these neighboring conflicts. By implication, each country's approach to Afghanistan is more an expression of the existential concerns they face in their regions, and less a reflection of their individual bilateral concerns with that country. For example, Pakistan has a long-running existential concern with India, while also maintaining a deep involvement in Afghan affairs related to border demarcation, ethnic and religious tensions, and transnational militancy.

This policy brief builds on previous work – including the 2016 book, *A Rock between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity*, co-authored with Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh – to examine recent political changes in the region, identify obstacles and opportunities for a sorely-needed neighborly concert on Afghanistan, and discuss possible paths forward.

The Global Overlay

The involvement of global powers can impact regional dynamics, but experience tells us that distant global powers come and go, whereas contiguous neighbors stay. For now, the US remains key, having led the international military presence since 2001. However, in recent years, the US has slowly realized that 20 years of

military investment has been unsuccessful, and that the country needs to pull out. Afghanistan is no longer a top priority. The US's interest in Afghanistan will now likely be single-minded: to prevent the country from becoming a staging ground for new international terror attacks on the US and its allies.

Meanwhile, other global powers – Russia, in particular – have stepped up their interest in Afghanistan. Building on its historic experience and networks, Russia has positioned itself as a possible challenger to the US, hosting a series of dialogue meetings between key parties in the Afghan conflict, and between neighboring states, before choosing to align itself with the US-led process. Russia can reinvigorate those alternative tracks when it finds the right time. Russia has a keen interest to preserve order in Central Asia – and Afghanistan is key in this regard. Yet, it remains reluctant to assume any main responsibilities at this point.

China, which shares a short stretch of border with Afghanistan, also monitors events closely. The country has invested in Afghan infrastructure development and rights to mineral exploration. However, those entanglements have not been enough to motivate China to take a leading diplomatic or military role. However, this neutral position could change as the impending Belt and Road Initiative will rely on basic stability in the region (if not exactly Afghanistan) and China could find itself pulled into these conflicts eventually. Beijing is aware that China and US have similar interests in Afghan stability – and should work together on these points – but this idea does not garner much enthusiasm. Current Sino-American frictions will not be fixed in Afghanistan.

Even if their intentions and engagements remain elusive, global powers will have significant impacts on the dynamics in the regions surrounding Afghanistan and influence how neighboring states react to upcoming changes in Afghan politics.

The Gulf Rivalry and Afghanistan

One issue of overwhelming significance will be how the Biden administration engages with Iran, and by extension, how it will relate to the Iran-Saudi rivalry for hegemony in the Gulf region. This rivalry has had periods of major influence on the Afghan battle ground. Iran lives with the veiled threat of US military action

and resents having a US military presence to its east and west. Under the shadow of the US and Iran's conflict regarding Iran's nuclear program, the Iran-Saudi relationship has seemed less significant. Yet, for Afghanistan, this relationship – and how the US deals with it – will be decisive.

In the event that the US re-enters the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – often referred to as the nuclear deal – this will not automatically lead to friendlier relations in the Gulf. Saudi and its closest allies in the Gulf have signaled that they would react forcefully to the US reentering the nuclear deal, while Iran has signaled unwillingness to engage with the US on limiting its regional power projection. While a full revival of the JCPOA opens up possibilities for a more balanced regional security architecture in the Gulf, establishing that security will require a lot more effort from all parties.

This Iran-Saudi situation is potentially worrisome for Afghanistan as the two countries have always maintained a rivalry in Afghanistan (albeit in recent years Iran has been considerably more active than the Saudis through its support of the government and building ties to the Taliban leadership). Similarly, the Iran-Saudi rivalry has been at the forefront of the wars in Syria and Yemen and critical to the conflicts in Bahrain, Lebanon and elsewhere. Nobody can rule out the possibility that an Iran-Saudi engagement could re-escalate in Afghanistan following a US withdrawal.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy orientation has changed considerably over the past few years: its emphasis on social reforms, economic diversification, and Islamic moderation has gone hand in hand with mounting political repression, nationalism and aggressive regional politics. Presently, the religious-cum-political networks are not likely to be a primary vehicle for Saudi engagement, but renewed engagement in other forms is certainly a possibility. The 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (with tacit Saudi backing) has a clear anti-Iranian undercurrent and could be a signal of escalating tensions between Gulf countries.

Saudi Arabia watched with interest as its independent-minded neighbor in the Gulf – Qatar – built political capital with the US and beyond as it hosted the talks between the US and the Taliban and those between the Afghan government and the Taliban. For Qatar, with extreme pressure and sanctions imposed by Saudi and



other Gulf countries, the ability to receive the US Secretary of State at regular intervals came at the right time. The UAE has significant business dealings with Afghanistan and is less likely to seek a deeper political engagement with Afghan conflict parties.

Of all these countries in the region, however, Iran has worked most systematically to position itself in advance of the Afghan transformation that will come with US military withdrawal. For one, its building of diplomatic relations to the Taliban has been widely noted. More recently, when Iranian Foreign Minister Javed Zarif did an interview with the Kabul-based *Tolo* news,¹ he confirmed that Iran actively recruited Afghans to fight alongside Assad's forces in Syria and suggesting the same forces may be useful in fighting IS in Afghanistan (emphasizing Afghan command). His comments created quite a stir. As Iran has much at stake in Afghanistan following the US's impending withdrawal, this may encourage them to participate in conventional multilateral forums.

New Central Asian Lead on Afghanistan?

Over the near-two-decade-long and US-led intervention, the five states of Central Asia have been reluctant to engage politically on the Afghan issue. Given the central role that Turkmenistan played in brokering peace during the Taliban's rule (1996–2001), this lack of engagement is curious. These countries – especially Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan with their contiguous borders – follow Afghan developments closely. Simultaneously, initiatives in the energy

and infrastructure domains have begun to bear fruit, but many grander schemes for connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia remain on the drawing board, at least for now. Uzbekistan is at the lead among the Central Asian states, but coordinated action, to date, appears lacking.

After the change of Presidents in Uzbekistan in 2016, we did see some significant change. In late March 2018, Uzbekistan's President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, hosted the 'Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Peace Process, Security Cooperation & Regional Connectivity'. At the conclusion of the conference, Mirziyoyev offered Uzbekistan as a site to host and possibly facilitate intra-Afghan talks.² By early 2021, Uzbekistan had become a member of the four-country group (with Germany, Indonesia and Norway) that offered Qatar support for its role in hosting the Afghan peace process.

Then, in September 2020, Mirziyoyev suggested to the UN General Assembly that a UN Committee on Afghanistan should be established.³ In his view, the committee would support the peace process, address counter-terrorism issues (with an emphasis on cultivating interconnectivity) and, by extension, secure international support for reconstruction.

While Uzbekistan has clearly taken the lead on Afghanistan among the Central Asian states, the other countries maintain some interests in various domains, but proceed more carefully on the diplomatic front. The collective view of the region appears to be less focused on the possibilities that may emerge following US withdrawal and more focused on how to hedge against new threats from Afghanistan in this aftermath.

The Central Asian region is very much the domain of China and Russia, in large part having worked out a division of labor in which the Chinese focus on the economy and the Russians on security. China's BRI (originally announced in Kazakhstan in 2013) overwhelms all other external initiatives. The US's leverage has already waned in the region and will decline even more following its withdrawal.

The Impact of South Asia's Conflict

For Afghanistan, Pakistan is the neighbor that has been most deeply and consistently engaged in Afghan political and military battles. Yet, for Pakistan, India represents its existential security threat. The Indian-Pakistani bilateral security

dynamic has effectively blocked any genuine security cooperation from evolving within South Asia and it also determines both states' engagement with Afghanistan. India began scaling up its engagement in Afghanistan after 2001 and while it does not have a direct military presence there, Delhi has steadily increased its supply of military equipment to the Afghan government. Meanwhile, Pakistan has worked to maintain influence in Afghanistan, enabling the Taliban while working simultaneously with the US and its allies.

India and Pakistan's relationship has deteriorated in recent years and the conflicts in Kashmir proved to be a watershed moment. Early in 2019, 40 Indian soldiers were killed in a suicide attack in Pulwama and the attack was linked to Jaish-e-Mohammad, which operates from Pakistan. India's response was unconventionally sharp and it responded by bombing an alleged Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp in Balakot (in undisputed Pakistani territory). Pakistan later shot down an Indian jet fighter, but quickly returned the pilot and offered to shut down offices of militant groups in Kashmir. Later that year, India took legal measures and formally annexed the parts of Kashmir already under its control.

India has gradually come to recognize China, not Pakistan, as its most relevant Other. Pakistan has sought to counter-balance India by pursuing good relations with China and the US. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a massive infrastructure and investment program, is effectively serving as a pilot for BRI. China has repeatedly indicated it wants to see Afghanistan has part of CPEC, but there is little detail on how and when and in what capacity. What really matters for Pakistan is that China seems to be its best bet to offset India's influence in South Asia. Interestingly, China has displayed some willingness to play on its relationship with Pakistan in an Afghan context, most prominently in 2015, when it laid the groundwork for – and hosted – the Murree talks (including China, US, Afghan government and Taliban).

India's global significance has grown, as has its relative supremacy in South Asia. India has also become increasingly favored by Washington, and certainly as seen through the eyes of Pakistan's leadership. The 2006 Indo-US nuclear deal, which in effect condoned India as the only state in the world to possess nuclear weapons while not being member to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, was a watershed. For

the US, India is critically important to balance China's influence in East Asia and the Pacific.

In Afghanistan, however, while the US has been facilitating India's engagement in reconstruction and development, it has worked to limit India's security and diplomatic engagement. One rationale is to insulate discussions about Afghanistan's future from the South Asian conflict. India, however, views this exclusion as a snub and see themselves as having a significant economic role in a post-settlement Afghanistan. In and around Afghanistan, India stands out for not having engaged directly with the Taliban. Importantly, India has successfully negotiated access with Iran to its port city of Chahbahar, which could give Afghanistan sea access independent of Pakistan. The Indian-Iranian partnership is evolving slowly but could become important in the Afghan context.

For all actors involved in South Asia, the issues at stake have enormous magnitude, and Afghanistan can be seen as one issue on which to build mutual understanding in the region. Key actors, including China and the US, have long been reluctant to link the South Asian conflict with Afghanistan, but experience suggests this view is short-sighted: an Afghan normalization not endorsed by both India and Pakistan will be unsustainable.

What's Next for the Regional Concert?

The Afghan Peace Process, from the vantage point of early February 2021, looks extremely fragile. While all parties insist the talks are 'Afghan-led' and 'Afghan-owned', it is also clear the US has pushed for the talks by engaging directly with the Taliban against the Afghan government's will and has continued to act as a de facto facilitator. Well aware of the critical role of the neighborly context, but also keenly conscious of the inadequacies of all existing platforms for negotiations, the US Special Representative for

Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad (who a newly-installed Biden chose to keep on the job for at least the short term) has chosen to engage the countries either one-by-one or in various ad-hoc groupings. The underlying analysis here is that that approach does not represent a working platform nor a concerted will among the neighbors. And it does not bode well for what will happen when the US seeks relief from this diplomatic responsibility.

There has been no lack of regional initiatives over the past two decades. The most prominent is the Heart-of-Asia process (also referred to as Istanbul process and led by Turkey and Afghanistan) which includes 16 countries as full participants and 17 countries and 12 multilateral organizations as supporting actors. Providing a forum to host ministerial consultations, implement confidence-building measures, and coordinate multilateral entities, Heart-of-Asia fills an important role, but it possesses neither the capacity nor the agility to serve as a platform for strengthening the neighborly concert while the Afghan political process unfolds.

The so-called troika initiative, bringing together China, Russia and the US to coordinate on Afghanistan, and has played an important role in preventing (or at least, freezing) rivaling tracks. Also, a troika-plus-one forum, including Pakistan, has been active. Pakistan is undoubtedly the one country in the neighborhood that has been most deeply and consistently involved in Afghan affairs; however, the reluctance of the global powers to involve other neighbors alongside Pakistan is quite telling.

Established regional entities seem reluctant to take on the Afghan task. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes all relevant actors in South and Central Asia (but only Iran from the Gulf with an observer status), discusses Afghanistan regularly and could play a key role, assuming there is will to place

the Afghan issue high on the agenda. Some have suggested the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) could be influential due to their wider membership (albeit not China, India nor Russia) and legitimacy among all parties to the Afghan conflict. The OIC, however, has shown little interest in the task even though they follow Afghan affairs closely. In this light, some have advocated an OIC-SCO joint endeavor.

The fact is that the clock is ticking. Afghanistan's neighbors are aware of this situation and they appear to be taking steps to prepare for multiple scenarios, including cultivating their proxy networks in the event of a further escalation of war. Yet, there is little or no willingness, by countries and organizations alike, to fill the void that will be left as the US withdraws. Fostering a proactive concert on Afghanistan is long overdue. In the absence of this, the consequences may be dire, not only for Afghanistan itself, but also throughout its neighborhood. ■

Notes

1. 'Transcript of TOLONews interview with Iran's Javad Zarif', 21 December 2020. Available at: tolonews.com/afghanistan-168674.
2. 'Uzbekistan offers to host talks between Afghan government, Taliban', Reuters 27 March 2018. Available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-uzbekistan-afghanistan-conference-idUSKBN1H30UM.
3. 'Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly', 23 September 2020. Available at: www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/speech-president-republic-uzbekistan-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-75th-session-united-nations.

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