

# BULLETIN

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## Regional Problems for Stability in Afghanistan

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*Since spring 2009, the United States has promoted multilateral diplomatic cooperation between neighbouring countries to Afghanistan as one of the most important dimensions of stabilizing the country. However, the experience of the past decade (including lessons from Iraq) suggest that this approach will not lead to the desired results. Therefore, it is hard to expect that multilateral diplomacy will lead to an acceleration in the process of reconciliation in Afghanistan or to the development of economic cooperation around Afghanistan.*

**Political Conditions.** The current U.S. strategy in Afghanistan assumes reciprocal and positive links between the NATO-ISAF military campaign (the so-called “military surge”) and more development assistance and economic and diplomatic cooperation around Afghanistan (the so-called “diplomatic surge”). Barack Obama’s administration stresses that Afghanistan’s neighbours are united by common interests (based on the threats from transnational terrorism and drug trafficking) and opportunities arising from the economic potential and transit location of a country. Those interests should translate into their willingness to compromise and cooperate with each other. Since 2009, the U.S., along with Germany, is stressing the importance of the International Contact Group (ICG) for Afghanistan and Pakistan. This forum brings together more than 50 countries and international organizations to coordinate the activities of the NATO, EU, UN and IMF. With a plan to strengthen diplomatic and economic cooperation around Afghanistan, the ICG launched in July 2011 the Working Group on Regional Cooperation, which is co-chaired by Turkey and the UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). At the same time, the ICG also launched the Working Group for Afghan Reconciliation and Reintegration.

**Security of Afghanistan and its Neighbours.** Hamid Karzai’s administration is in a difficult position because it lacks confidence about the scale of U.S. military and economic engagement after 2014. From Afghanistan’s point of view, the ideal solution would be to have formal security guarantees from the U.S. and a permanent presence through military bases on Afghanistan soil. The prospect for this kind of partnership was the foundation of Karzai’s relationship with the administration of George W. Bush. Unfortunately, the Alliance’s Lisbon summit (December 2010) did not clarify these issues when it adopted the “Declaration of the NATO–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership.” The uncertainty of Afghan authorities about future U.S. plans and potential reactions of neighbouring powers explains the prolonged negotiations on a draft of a new “Declaration on the U.S.–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership” (which started in May 2010 with the last round held in September). After the success of the U.S. commando raid against Osama bin Laden, the Afghan authorities became even more doubtful about the extent of Western support after 2014 and, therefore, are willing to accommodate the interests of their neighbours in Afghanistan’s strategic calculations. For instance, Afghanistan might be willing to step up bilateral cooperation with India because of its fear of a strengthened Taliban and the possible influence of Pakistan on the terms of Afghan reconciliation. It seems also that for Karzai’s administration multilateral security guarantees (e.g., the UN) for Afghanistan are not attractive alternatives.

The Western countries’ approach contrasts with the calculations of Pakistan, Iran, India, China and Russia, which are perceiving Afghanistan as part of their national security strategies and through the prism of balancing the influence of their rivals. For Pakistan, its northern neighbour is still a space

for “strategic depth” in case of any conflict with India. In recent years, Russia, Iran and China benefited from reduced U.S. military capabilities in “hot spots” outside Afghanistan (such as Georgia, the Persian Gulf and Taiwan Strait). Although a majority of these countries also benefited from a decade of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, in the long run only India and Central Asian countries might be interested in a continued American military presence there. In the last decade, neighbouring countries also were not able to start serious talks about a possible status for Afghanistan as a neutral country.

**Regional Integration and Trade.** The documents adopted at international conferences on Afghanistan (i.a. Bonn in 2001 and Kabul in 2010) declare support for multilateral cooperation on projects that might help with the development of regional trade, land transport and railroads as well as pipeline construction in and around Afghanistan. Afghan authorities also have increasingly used the term “New Silk Road,” which envisioned benefits to Afghanistan and its neighbours. However, a closer look at the majority of projects indicates that these initiatives are primarily used by the Afghan administration as a way to strengthen bilateral relations with stronger neighbours.

A clash of interests and a lack of common funds are obstacles to regional economic integration under the auspices of such forums as the ECO and the SAARC. Despite the signing in January 2011 of an agreement on the free transit of goods from India through Pakistan to Afghanistan, the latter two states can not agree about Afghan cargo fees and insurance. Poor atmospherics in official Afghanistan–Pakistan relations resulted in the application of Pakistani procedures that were unfavourable to Afghan shipments in transit. For Afghanistan, which has no direct sea access it is more favourable to increase transit through ports in Iran. This option is supported by a well-developed Iranian infrastructure and duty exemptions for many Afghan goods imported by India.

**Afghanistan's Infrastructure and Resources.** Afghanistan is still almost absent from the railroad maps of South and Central Asia and the Middle East. This situation began to change in 2009 with the launch of the “Northern Distribution Network” between Central Asia and Afghanistan, but transit there is limited to military supplies for ISAF troops and is dependent on U.S.–Russia relations. Moreover, there is only one operating railway line in Afghanistan (from Mazar-i-Sharif to the border with Uzbekistan) and no visible progress on the construction of new railroads to Iran or Tajikistan.

Equally problematic are the prospects for the creation of pipelines from Central Asia to South Asia via Afghanistan. There have been two decades of fruitless discussion about the TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) natural-gas pipeline project, which would connect gas fields in Turkmenistan with the growing markets of South Asia. The U.S. and Pakistan are still promoting TAPI as an element of regional economic cooperation and a confidence-building measure between Pakistan and India. The U.S. also has seen TAPI as an alternative for the IPI (Iran–Pakistan–India) gas pipeline project. Both have little chance for success, since a lack of security in Afghanistan prevents investment in TAPI. It is also clear that the government of India has a growing preference for routes that might bypass Pakistan or for the possibility to import LNG from Persian Gulf countries.

In 2010, it was announced that Afghanistan is rich with huge mineral and natural resource deposits, estimated at the time at \$3 trillion in market value. They are seen as a pillar of the future economic sovereignty of Afghanistan and the main source of funding for the Afghanistan National Security Forces in the next several decades. Particularly promising are deposits of iron, zinc and cobalt (worth more than \$900 billion), along with lithium, oil and gas (worth more than \$200 billion). A lack of security in Afghanistan and the subsequent concerns of Western investors also are barriers to the exploitation of this potentially huge resource base. Almost entirely state-owned companies from China and India are active there and racing for tenders for the exploitation of mineral deposits.

**Prospects.** Opinions about the necessity for the cooperation of neighbouring countries in the settlement of the conflict also have been common in debates about how to stabilize Iraq. However, rather than diplomatic assistance from outside Iraq, it was achieved due to improved security situation and progress in Sunni–Shia reconciliation. The diplomacy of the U.S. and Iraq coalition had no effect on the main internal forces in the Iraq conflict as well as on changes in the positions of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It is clear that the ICG so far has not been involved in direct contacts between the representatives of the Afghan administration and the Taliban. Also its activity has no impact on the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It should be stressed that for the neighbours of Afghanistan all potential economic opportunities are secondary to their national security interests. NATO and the EU countries should focus on clarifying the shape and horizon of its political, military and economic presence in Afghanistan after 2014. With the scenario that there will be a withdrawal of the majority of the NATO–ISAF force from Afghanistan by 2014 and the country's further destabilization, it should be taken into account that control over mineral deposits will become the axis of rivalries between warring Afghan factions and their patrons in neighbouring countries.