

NOREF Report

Post-war on terror? Implications from a regional perspective¹

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Executive summary

This paper examines three possible impacts of the death of Osama bin Laden on the war on terror from the perspective of countries surrounding Afghanistan. A first scenario sees America abandoning the global war on terror (GWOt) on the territory of Afghanistan and moving its attention to new fronts, such as containing the uprisings in the Middle East or countering the economic rise of China, which will not suit the countries surrounding Afghanistan where terrorism remains a problem. These countries seek recognition for their own struggles against terrorism, more international cooperation and no double standards, and reject the distinction between a global war with al-Qaeda, in which America has an interest, and localised insurgencies.

The second trajectory may see a deeper entrenchment of the American presence in the region through the enactment of a strategic agreement between America and Afghanistan. The raid on the Abbottabad compound may have actually strengthened the argument for America sustaining a large footprint to include bases for human and technical intelligence beyond the planned withdrawal by 2014. Once again, this will not suit the other countries in the region, which associate the continued presence of NATO and American troops with increased insecurity. While some Afghan public opinion and politicians may wish to continue to benefit from the troop presence that brings both security guarantees against Afghanistan's neighbours and aid, the country's neighbours worry about permanent American bases in the region as a violation of the principle of neutrality for Afghanistan and the sanctity of territorial sovereignty in the wider region.

The third possible implication of the Bin Laden killing is the possibility of a political settlement through reconciliation with the Taliban and their integration into the Afghan political process. So far, the engagement of regional countries in the negotiations has mostly been associated with spoiler behaviour, although there are ample opportunities for their involvement as facilitators for a genuine regional and national reconciliation, especially as the return of the Taliban in some form seems to be a *fait accompli*.

The paper suggests that any alternative to regional diplomacy for regional reconciliation would be the fragmentation and partition of Afghanistan along ethnic fault lines, which is undesirable for the region and for Afghanistan itself. Security guarantees need to come from within the region through a resumption of political dialogue and the intensification of economic relations among the region's countries, a process that can be facilitated by regional and international organisations.

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Introduction

The announcement of the death of the al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden by President Obama on May 2nd 2011 came ironically eight years to the day of George W. Bush's "Mission accomplished" speech on board the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln*. This time, the eradication of America's Most Wanted Man proved to be a decisive action and a genuine success for the American president as he prepares for the 2012 elections. Yet could it be that, similar to the hasty announcement in 2003 regarding the end of major combat operations in Iraq, President Obama also prematurely implied the end of the global war on terror (GWOt)?

There now seems to be three possible consequences of Bin Laden's death as it concerns Afghanistan. A first scenario sees America abandoning the GWOt in South Asia and moving its attention to new fronts, such as containing the uprisings in places such as Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen or countering the economic rise of China. This outcome would be part of the "localisation" if not the abandonment of the GWOt trajectory and discourse. After all, in 2009 the Obama administration had already begun to replace the term GWOt with "overseas contingency operations", a move that not only sought to create distance from the post-September 11th Bush years, but also to introduce a nuanced separation between the different insurgencies in the world: the "localisation", as opposed to the globalisation, of the fight against terrorism would allow America to abandon its role as global policeman and concentrate on case-by-case targeting of terrorist-related activities. The second possibility, not necessarily contradictory to the first, would see a deeper entrenchment of the American presence in the South and Central Asia region. The raid on the Abbottabad compound in Pakistan from Jalalabad may have actually strengthened the argument for the prolonged presence of military or intelligence troops in Afghanistan beyond the planned withdrawal by 2014. The third possible implication, more certain than the others, is that the killing of Bin Laden raises the possibility of an imminent political settlement through reconciliation with the Taliban and their integration into the Afghan political process. By all indications, the planned Bonn II meeting in December 2011 would introduce a reversal that Bonn I in 2001 did not even aim at: bringing the Taliban to the table.

In the meantime, what are the broader regional security implications of these scenarios? This paper examines the reactions from and implications for regional players surrounding Afghanistan of the three possible implications of the Bin Laden killing. Firstly, it asks whether regional actors are prepared to follow America in abandoning the GWOt narrative. It then examines their reactions to a possible transformed, but sustained, long-term presence of American troops in the region. Finally, it asks whether regional players can learn to live with the Taliban should they make a comeback in Afghanistan.

Mission accomplished?

With the al-Qaeda threat diminished as the primary argument for foreign forces being in Afghanistan, a reassessment of the goals, strategies and costs of the war once again opened up the debate between the merits of counterinsurgency (COIN) versus those of counterterrorism (CT).

President Obama's strategic review shortly after he came into office in 2009 involved an intensive debate on whether America and NATO should engage in a COIN campaign (securing the Afghan population and helping to provide basic services, thus strengthening support and trust for the government and turning people away from the Taliban) or devote their resources to CT (going after al-Qaeda terrorists directly). Although the debate was about priorities for American resources and troops, the two approaches in fact have been pursued in tandem by the international alliance. At the very least, the COIN and CT division of responsibilities was the basis of the two different military operations in Afghanistan from the very beginning: Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). OEF forces under American command, deployed in Afghanistan under Article 51 of the UN Charter and the right to self-defence following UN Security Council Resolutions 1368 (2001) and 1373 (2001), continued combat operations against al-Qaeda leaders within Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. While the American forces taking part in OEF were part of the GWOt, ISAF, comprising another contingent of international troops, was deployed under a Chapter VII mandate through Security Council Resolution

1386 (December 2001).² ISAF was initially created in December 2001 to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in maintaining security in Kabul. With NATO's takeover of the ISAF command in 2003, its expansion beyond Kabul and the subsequent worsening security situation, the operation metamorphosed from a security mission into a COIN operation, under the direction of US Central Command. By 2009, with both operations still ongoing through Joint Special Operations Command, debate raged in the Obama administration between advocates of the COIN strategy, led by Defense Secretary Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and those favouring the CT approach, like Vice President Joseph Biden. Although COIN became the most visible strategy in Afghanistan, CT continued, both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, through Central Intelligence Agency Special Operations Forces.

The end of Osama bin Laden and earlier reports of the presence of only 100 al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan seemed to indicate that American CT forces could now wind down operations in that country, leaving COIN to NATO troops and possibly moving the covert war across the border to Pakistan, which was increasingly recognised as the epicentre of terrorism. The Bin Laden killing would also seem to vindicate those in favour of a more targeted and effective CT strategy over an expensive COIN one. Already in 2010 Republicans voted in Congress to curtail funding for the Afghan war effort, arguing that the \$10 billion a month could be better used for high-tech warfare to target terrorist leaders. However, with President Obama producing results, the House on May 26th 2011 overwhelmingly passed a \$690 billion defence authorisation bill for the 2012 fiscal year that fully funds operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, \$1.1 billion above what the administration originally requested.

While the CT approach received new backing by Congress, most significant was the approval by the House of Representatives of the National Defense Authorization Act, a new authorisation for the government to use military force in the war on terror,

2 Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "Afghanistan", Blanca Antonini et al., eds, *Security Council Resolutions under Chapter VII*, Madrid, FRIDE, 2009, <http://www.fride.org/publication/655/security-council-resolutions-under-chapter-vii>.

giving extended authority to the executive branch to wage war against terrorists who are deemed associates of al-Qaeda, but who are not necessarily tied to the September 11th attacks. Opponents claimed that by dropping references to 9/11 altogether and including wording such as undefined "associated forces", the act could be read as a "blanket declaration for a war without end".³ The increased powers of the executive branch, as well as the extension of the Patriot Act, approved minutes before it was set to expire on May 27th 2011, with amendments for surveillance of non-American suspects without ties to terrorist groups, indicated that the war on terror was far from over with the Bin Laden killing.

Yet for American policymakers, Bin Laden's killing marks the end of at least the formal *global* war on the territory of Afghanistan. The fight against terrorism may not be over, but the reason for this war are, in the words of Vali Nasr, a South Asia scholar and until recently a senior adviser to the State Department, "not as compelling as before bin Laden was killed".⁴ For Nasr, "Afghanistan is now much more of a local civil war than a global strategic war for the United States". His comments hinted that the true global war, in the American view, is the one that pitched America against al-Qaeda in revenge for 9/11. Everything else is "local". With the reason for the "global" war largely resolved, America could now see its mission as being accomplished. This line of thinking informs American demands for the Taliban to give up all affiliation with al-Qaeda. The separation would create a clear distinction between an ongoing localised insurgency (against American troops and the Karzai government) and the international war, which needs to move on.

The need to transcend the GWOt narrative and strategy also seems prompted by other factors that go beyond the death of Bin Laden. Firstly, the threat of a global Islamic revolution seems to have faded with the democratic revolutions that spread in North Africa

3 See statement of Congressman Jerrold Nadler, "Nadler opposes redefinition of U.S. war on terror and expansion of executive branch war powers", May 11th 2011, http://nadler.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1656&Itemid=132.

4 NPR (National Public Radio) interview with Vali Nasr, "Bin Laden's death may speed Afghan war settlement", May 20th 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/10/136162876/bin-laden-s-death-may-speed-afghan-war-settlement>.

and the Middle East since December 2010. The al-Qaeda message of violence as the only instrument for regime change became *passé* in the context of democratic uprisings. The legacy of terrorism as a preferred means for resistance to foreign presence or backing for authoritarian regimes seems to have lost much of its appeal. Secondly, increased competition from new players in the wider Asian region, notably China, underscores the need to move the front of any new metaphorical “war” away from terrorism and toward countering indirectly the states that are successfully resetting the parameters of the world economic order.

However, from the perspective of the countries surrounding Afghanistan, it would be premature to assume that the fight against terrorism is over with the demise of its most public leader, much as it would be misguided to distinguish between a global war with al-Qaeda, in which America has an interest, and localised insurgencies whose brunt is borne by the rest of the world. From the perspective of these countries, downgrading global terrorism to local insurgency is an example of a harmful double standard in the fight against terrorism. Terrorism in the region is unlikely to disappear as long as conditions remain conducive to its spread. These include inequality, injustice, discrimination, marginalisation and foreign occupation, as well as financing from, for example, the narcotics trade.

Distinguishing between global terrorists and local insurgents in Afghanistan misses the point that much of the insurgency is fueled by what is perceived as the occupation of the country by American and NATO troops. Even if the al-Qaeda messages were not echoed in the Middle Eastern uprisings, radical groups and individuals who share the ideology of international jihad continue to operate from the Arabian Peninsula all the way to Pakistan. The shifting post-GWoT narrative may want to paint al-Qaeda franchises as decentralised, independent and locally focused Islamist groups fighting against incumbent regimes, but for the states that are threatened, distinguishing between global terrorist and local insurgents shortchanges these countries’ concerns. For example, the national security adviser of Afghanistan, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, insisted in a Tolo TV interview on May 19th 2011 that the press had to be careful with the semantics it used and

should not refer to insurgents as an “opposition”, but as “terrorists”,⁵ a reference more to their tactics than their goals.

For concerned states, the GWoT cannot be abandoned because terrorism is not only an American preoccupation. In the immediate aftermath of the announcement of Bin Laden’s death on May 2nd, foreign ministries of the regional countries were quick to point this out. Pakistan’s foreign minister reminded the West that almost 30,000 Pakistani civilians and 5,000 security and armed forces officials had lost their lives in the campaign against al-Qaeda since 2001.⁶ The statements of the Foreign Ministries of both China and Russia recalled that they too were victims of terrorism. The Russians mentioned that their country was “one of the first to come up against the danger that global terrorism carries and, unfortunately, not by hearsay does it know what Al Qaeda is”.⁷ Russia has its own Bin Laden, Doku Umarov, and its own struggles with insurgency in the North Caucasus, where al-Qaeda emissaries are said to be operating. Chinese security is threatened by Muslim separatists who have waged a bloody uprising in the north-western region of Xinjiang and are suspected of receiving foreign backing, according to Chinese officials. India and Iran also warned against the discontinuation of CT efforts. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs’ statement on May 2nd stated that “[t]he world must not let down its united effort to overcome terrorism and eliminate the safe havens and sanctuaries that have been provided to terrorists in our own neighborhood. The struggle must continue unabated”.⁸ India has had its share of terror attacks from groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attack and which Pakistan allegedly continues to shelter. Iran seeks support for its own struggle against the Baluch Sunni fundamentalist group Jundullah,

5 See TOLO TV interview with National Security Adviser Rangin Dadfar Spanta, Goftefan, May 19th 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUdQfd8dhHo>.

6 See the statement of the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PR.NO.150/2011, May 5th 2011, http://www.mofa.gov.pk/Press_Releases/2011/May/PR_150.htm.

7 Fred Weir, “Russia praises bin Laden operation, seeks greater counterterror cooperation with US”, *Christian Science Monitor*, May 4th 2011, <http://news.yahoo.com/russia-praises-bin-laden-operation-seeks-greater-counterterror-160700089.html>

8 Ashish Kumar Sen, “India welcomes ‘historic’ bin Laden death”, *Washington Times*, May 2nd 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/may/2/india-welcomes-historic-bin-laden-death/print/>.

which operates in its eastern border province of Sistan-Balochistan. The Iranian government labels Jundullah a terrorist organisation, much like the Mojaheddin-e Khalq organisation, which, despite being on terrorist lists, is allowed to operate openly in some European countries. Iran also charges that it receives foreign – specifically American – backing.⁹

If Libya represented a major disagreement over foreign policy, the GWOt is one of the few causes that unite Russia, China, Iran, India and America. Yet discord persists in approaches to countering terrorism. One problem is the lack of a legally binding, universally agreed definition of terrorism. China, Russia, Iran and the Central Asian republics all continuously insist on finalising negotiations on the draft of the UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. They believe that the absence of a universal definition of what constitutes terrorism, terrorist acts and terrorist groups leads to abuse, injustice and double standards. Insisting on a definition is not only a legal matter for harmonising legislation, mutual assistance and extraditions, but is a political act to prevent the ad hoc labelling of terror groups as “terrorist” or “insurgent”. For example, Russia and China both insisted in their May 2nd press releases that they were *also victims of terrorism*, at a time when Chechen and Uighur groups are interchangeably referred to in the international press as militants, secessionists, separatists or insurgents. In June 2009 the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) adopted the Convention against Terrorism in Yekaterinburg, which contained a definition of terrorism for its member states. It set a remarkably different tone from the American and European Union approach, seeing terrorism as part of the Chinese “three evils doctrine” (separatism, extremism and terrorism) and highlighting the principles of territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs and social stability. The Iranians, in the meantime, echoing the position of many Arab and Latin American post-colonial states, seek a definition that would distinguish between terrorism and the “legitimate struggles of peoples under colonial rule or foreign occupation for their inalienable right of self-determination”.¹⁰

What these countries mostly want is recognition of their own struggles as part of the GWOt. Central Asian states bordering on Afghanistan, for example, have benefitted greatly from a GWOt dividend. They have received significant financial aid for providing support for operations in Afghanistan directly or by opening the northern distribution route and allowing the establishment of bases: an American base in Manas in Kyrgyzstan and Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan until 2005, and a French base in Tajikistan.

The threat of terrorism has also been used to crack down on internal dissent, especially by Islamist groups. Central Asian governments link their problems with terrorism to the criminal activity related to narcotics and small arms that has become rampant in the region as a direct result of mounting instability in Afghanistan and the activities of Islamic militant groups influenced by Pakistani madrasas. Afghanistan’s neighbours seek recognition for their own struggles, more international cooperation, fewer double standards and clarity on the use of the term terrorism for political purposes.

Protracted presence, protracted conflict?

Regional players’ interest in the continuation of the GWOt does not mean that they automatically endorse the long-term presence of American troops in the region. The Iranians are the most outspoken in connecting the persistence of insecurity in the region with the prolonged presence of American troops. In fact, during the conference on A World without Terrorism organised in Tehran on June 25th-26th 2011, the subtext was the need for regional cooperation (among Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Tajikistan) beyond the departure of American troops and the countering of terrorism as the motif for regional cooperation. The consensus was that the continued presence of American and NATO troops ran counter to these countries’ national interests and undermined regional security. During the closing ceremony, Iranian Foreign Minister Salehi said that the “illegal resort to force by governments, foreign invasion, occupation, and meddling in internal affairs of countries are some of the factors contributing to the emergence and escalation of

9 Seymour Hersh, “Preparing the battlefield”, *The New Yorker*, July 7th 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/07/080707fa_fact_hersh.

10 Outcome document of the International Conference on the Global Fight against Terrorism, Tehran, June 24th-25th 2011, <http://icterrorism.ir/en/?news=241>.

terrorism”.¹¹ According to a joint statement issued on June 25th at a tripartite meeting among Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the three pledged to intensify efforts to fight militant groups and combat narcotics trafficking while “rejecting foreign interference, which is blatant opposition to the spirit of Islam, and the peaceful cultural traditions of the region and its people”.¹²

In the meantime, negotiations between the American and Afghan governments on a strategic partnership began last year and intensified in April. The argument for a long-term American presence became more justified in the aftermath of the Bin Laden operation, which originated from an airbase in Jalalabad. The need for stealth, speed and operational autonomy dictated the necessity for launching the operation from Afghanistan. The potential need for similar operations after 2014 therefore requires a “large footprint” not only of human intelligence, but also of bases for technical intelligence and warfare in Afghanistan, which is the only country in the region that welcomes this foreign presence.

The Obama administration believes that premature withdrawal from Afghanistan would mean leaving behind a weak government that could soon be engulfed in factional war, just as the then-Afghan government was when the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989. The country would then be prey to hostile takeovers by regional players through political influence, if not through invading armies. However, the Afghan government and much of Afghan public opinion¹³ argue that although America may have its own geostrategic and economic interests, the long-term engagement of both the American military and its government is beneficial for Afghanistan. Their arguments appeal to Americans’ sense of their moral responsibility not to abandon Afghanistan once again, to contribute to the capacity-building and training of troops, and to eliminate the sanctuaries and bases that exist in Pakistan. The argument is pragmatic as well: America is stronger and certainly

richer than any neighbouring power, and it pays, literally, to be on the winning side. Afghanistan can “sell” its geopolitical situation and, in return, obtain security guarantees and sustained aid. According to National Security Adviser Spanta, the Afghan government seeks to negotiate the proposed strategic partnership from a position of strength, imposing certain conditions, although he did not elaborate on them.¹⁴ At the same time, he admitted that the government was not aware of the activities, numbers, precise location and operational modalities of the American troops in the country, and therefore could not adequately inform its public. It thus found itself under pressure from the Afghan parliament and ministers not to concede to American demands, a pressure that no doubt diminishes the legitimacy of strong popular backing in any negotiations.

For Spanta, a strategic alliance does not necessarily mean a military base, at least not a permanent one. A strategic agreement is supposed to give Afghanistan control over the bases on its territory. For its neighbours, however, the subtext is an agreement on permanent American military bases, a presence that violates the principle of Afghan neutrality. Any talk of a long-term presence of American troops makes the demand that Secretary of State Clinton issued to regional countries to “respect Afghanistan’s sovereignty, which means agreeing not to play out their rivalries within its borders” appear ironic.¹⁵ The experience of Iraq is not reassuring. The ongoing American troop presence, even after security was handed over to the Iraqis in 2008, continues to create friction among Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Malik, hard-line Shia who supported his government, opposition movements under Moqtada al-Sad, Kurds, Sunnis and some secular Shiite politicians, not to mention between Iraq and its neighbours.

Sovereignty remains a sacrosanct principle in the region. The SCO, much like ASEAN,¹⁶ for example, gives currency to the principles of respecting a nation’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. That is why the violation of territorial sovereignty, implicit in the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, deeply alarmed

11 *Tehran Times Online*, “Military intervention leads to escalation of terrorism: Salehi”, June 27th 2011, http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=243135.

12 *Outlook Afghanistan*, “Pak-Afghan-Iran agree to combat terrorism”, June 26th 2011, http://outlookafghanistan.net/news?post_id=1029

13 See the TOLO TV poll at <http://www.tolonews.com/en/component/poll/11-do-you-think-establishment-of-the-us-permanent-military-bases-will-be-beneficial-to-afghanistan>.

14 TOLO TV interview with Spanta.

15 Statement by American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the Asia Society, New York, February 18th 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>.

16 Association of South-East Asian Nations.

regional countries. If the question of sovereignty cannot be raised in the case of Pakistan, partly because of the contested Durand line that demarcates the border with Afghanistan, the other neighbours remain concerned by the American example during the raid. Russia, which views Central Asia as part of its sphere of interest/danger zone, has begun talks with Tajikistan to send up to 3,000 Russian border guards to train and manage Tajik forces at the Afghan border. Days after the Abbottabad raid, the Indian army chief, General V. K. Singh, claimed that India's armed forces were competent to carry out operations similar to the one conducted by America in Pakistan, a claim that drew a prompt and strong reaction from the Pakistani foreign secretary. Even Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani issued a series of demands to President Karzai during his April visit to Kabul, insisting that Afghanistan disclose details of any agreements it had with its Western allies. In May the Iranians were first to point out that with the killing of Bin Laden, the Americans had no more justification for remaining in Afghanistan.

One concrete outcome of the concern over a long-term American engagement has been a flurry of diplomatic shuffling and alliance-building among regional players, with a heavy emphasis on economic cooperation. Leading this group has been Pakistan. President Zardari visited Moscow on May 11th-14th and Prime Minister Gilani concluded a strategic dialogue on expanding cooperation on CT and Afghanistan with China at the end of April. Both Russia and China realise that Pakistan is key if they are to play a more active role in the region, and concessions must be made to ensure Pakistan's goodwill and interests. Pakistan has also been pressuring Afghanistan to rely more on China in case America abandons it. While America has proved its superiority in terms of intelligence and security hardware, an alliance with China and Russia provides a strong economic incentive for regional countries. China has assertively made economic investments in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, with its \$4 billion investment in the copper mine at Aynak in Afghanistan; agreeing to take over the operation of the port of Gwadar; and expressing a willingness to build the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline that it had hitherto opposed. For now, China has shied away from offering military support, happy to see America tied up with military

operations. Russia, which also expressed interest in joining the TAPI pipeline in May, created a quadripartite forum with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan in August 2010 to work on countering the spread of drugs; resuscitating the silk trade route; and investing in the oil, gas and hydropower sectors. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also promised to increase Indian aid to Afghanistan from \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion during his May 2011 visit to Kabul.

These economic projects are attractive for Afghanistan, which has little production, but potential purchasing power. In order to be able to execute them, however, the Afghan government needs to demonstrate its ability to control trade and put pressure on its neighbours. During the winter of 2010 the Iranians blocked the delivery of fuel tankers with the claim that they were being used to supply American troops. Trade across the Pakistani border of such staples as wheat has also been interrupted during crucial moments, suggesting to Afghanistan that its neighbouring countries use their commercial relations as a tool to assert political pressure. Regional economic cooperation may not be enough by itself to overcome the mistrust that exists in the region and which is likely to be fueled still further with the prospects of a long-term presence of American troops. Security guarantees are also necessary, especially as tension grows over claims and counter-claims of cross-border shelling and infiltration between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

A deal with the Taliban?

If the Afghan war in the post-Bin Laden and post-GWoT narrative is now a "civil war", as in Vali Nasr's account, then it can be resolved between protagonists in the field through a political settlement. Bin Laden's death may have created conditions for a hastened political settlement by making it easier for the Taliban to cut its 30-year ties with al-Qaeda without seeming to be disloyal. The grand narrative of a global jihad against the infidels, which the Afghan Arabs had perpetuated since the Soviet invasion, can now be abandoned with the emergence of a "civil war".

It is therefore not surprising that on the American side, one of the three conditions for negotiations with the Taliban has been to sever all links to al-Qaeda.

Yet this “precondition” for the talks is starting to mutate into a “post-condition” of the peace process. In a speech on February 18th 2011, Secretary of State Clinton hinted that previous American conditions for talks with the Taliban – that they lay down their arms, reject al-Qaeda and embrace the Afghan constitution – were no longer conditions that the Taliban had to meet before negotiations could begin, but were “necessary outcomes” of the final peace process.¹⁷ The fact that preconditions are becoming end conditions may mean that America is hoping the Taliban will agree to renounce violence if its combat troops are withdrawn. But the Obama administration would also want the Taliban to accept some troop presence beyond 2014 if the formal operation shifted into a training programme, and, perhaps, agree to military surveillance of activities outside the borders of Afghanistan. Ideally, the Taliban would accept a settlement of the Afghan “civil war”, gaining territorial concessions and predominance over other ethnic groups, while a covert regional intelligence war would not be their problem. It remains to be seen, however, if the Taliban would accept such a deal. For now, the insurgency cannot be called a “civil war” because it is largely reacting to the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan and not only waging war against the Karzai government.

In the meantime, the search is on for a capable and trusted third-party sponsor of negotiations, a search that seems to categorise regional players as either spoilers or facilitators. Pakistan is pitching itself openly as the spoiler if it is not given the role of facilitator. The arrest in Pakistan last year of Mullah Baradar, the Taliban second-in-command, who had been negotiating directly with President Karzai, shows that the Pakistani military and government may oppose any negotiations that do not include them. The killing of Bin Laden in the heartland of Pakistan without the overt cooperation of the country’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency may be an opportunity for the Americans to pursue direct talks with the Taliban without having to rely on Pakistani intelligence. However, a deal that does not include Pakistan is not a viable long-term solution. America has limited options in cutting off relations with Pakistan, because of the latter’s role in providing the critical NATO supply line to Afghanistan and preventing militants from obtaining nuclear

weapons or materials. America would also not want to see the development of a strategic alliance between Pakistan and China. With this assurance of its importance for America, Pakistan can threaten the regional peace by using its leverage on jihadi groups and its geography as assets to ensure it has a role to play in the negotiations in the short term, and keep its Afghan strategic depth to counter its rival India in the long term.

Saudi Arabia sponsored talks in Mecca in 2008 between the Afghan government and members of the Taliban to discuss positions and objectives, partly to please its Western allies, partly to curb the future regional influence of its rival Iran.¹⁸ Yet the overt Saudi role has diminished considerably in the recent past, possibly because the Taliban refused to break with al-Qaeda. It is unlikely that Saudi Arabia, threatened by upheavals in its own neighbourhood, would have the ambition or be allowed to play a decisive role in the near future. Turkey, a more distant neighbour, but with its Islamic government and membership of NATO, seeks the opportunity to be a broker. The November 2011 regional conference in Turkey may reveal that America will want to use this Turkey as a mediator. Turkey, however, is too detached from the region to be able to play any significant role other than that of polite bridge-builder. If it continues to bow under pressure to keep India, Iran and the Chinese-Russian-Central Asian nexus out of the picture, as it did in its pre-London conference in 2010,¹⁹ Turkish initiatives may not lead to genuine regional reconciliation.

India, Russia and Iran, and to some extent the Central Asian countries, have been united in their rejection of the talks, not least because of their fears of Pashtun domination of other Afghan ethnic groups that they have historically supported. India does not want to see an expansion of Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan and has been historically aligned for this purpose with the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance. Russia has on numerous occasions objected to the delisting of

¹⁷ Statement by American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the Asia Society.

¹⁸ http://articles.cnn.com/2008-10-05/world/afghan.saudi.talks_1_taliban-leader-mullah-omar-afghan-government?_s=PM:WORLD.

¹⁹ The London conference was a one-day international conference to chart progress on Afghanistan held on January 28th 2010. Turkey organised a regional summit on January 26th to prepare for the main conference; see <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/Afghan-Neighbors-Key-Players-Prep-For-London-Conference-82707607.html>.

Taliban from the UN Security Council Al-Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee (also known as the 1267 Committee). The Iranian Shia continue to mistrust the Taliban as Sunni extremists because of ideological/ Islamic differences and the massacre of Iranian diplomats by the Taliban in Mazar-i Sharif in 1998. While NATO alleges that the Iranians have supported the Taliban as late as in March 2011, any so-called support to insurgents is motivated by opposition to the foreign military presence in Afghanistan rather than by affinity with the Taliban.

It is not surprising that America and its allies have never approached any of these countries to play the role of facilitator. They are all suspected of being capable of acting as spoilers through their relationships with non-Pashtun former leaders of the largely Tajik and Uzbek Northern Alliance members and by influencing the members of the Afghan parliament. However, as the return of the Taliban to the political scene increasingly becomes a *fait accompli* and is presented as “the political solution”, Iran, India and Russia are softening their opposition to the talks. Indian Prime Minister Singh, in a May 13th speech in Kabul, endorsed the process of national reconciliation and claimed that India would respect the choices that Afghans made.²⁰ All these countries would learn to live with reconciliation and reintegration, as long as Afghans lead the process. However, if the negotiations are genuinely about reconciliation as much as they are about the reintegration of the Taliban into the political process, then these regional players need to be allowed to play a role, if only through quiet diplomacy. After all, past talks that did not include them in Mecca and the Maldives provided more of an opportunity for a haj and a seaside holiday than a forum for yielding any concrete results.

There are opportunities to be explored for the involvement of these countries as facilitators of a genuine regional and national reconciliation. The extent to which Iran and Pakistan would reconcile their positions over the nature of the Afghan state and society and the possible resumption of cooperation between America and Iran – as had been the case in 2001 before the Axis of Evil speech – seem to be two examples of strategic moves that could turn the tide in the region.

In the meantime, not all of Afghanistan’s neighbours have acted as spoilers, even though they have been largely neglected by international players. Political, strategic and pragmatic solutions have been proposed by most Central Asian states. These include, among others, SCO initiatives for a SCO-Afghanistan contract group; the SCO Moscow Declaration on Afghanistan, and the 2009 Action Plan of SCO Member States and Afghanistan on Combating Terrorism, Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime; the Uzbek proposal for reinvigorating the 6+3 process under the UN; Kazakh efforts to engage the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) during its 2010 chairmanship of that organisation; the Turkmen proposal for mediating talks; and Kyrgyz and Tajik proposals for cooperation with Afghanistan. These regional players believe that much greater use should be made of intelligence rather than military force in Afghanistan, with more emphasis on economic projects as incentives for peace.

The late Richard Holbrooke, former American special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, was apparently interested in a diplomatic solution involving a peace process led by America, but including all regional players. Having America lead the negotiations, however, is a contentious issue, since it is currently enmeshed in military operations in Afghanistan and is considered a party to the war. Moreover, its legitimacy and long-term intentions are questioned by regional players. The solution would be for the UN to create a super envoy solely engaged in shuttle diplomacy, something that the report of the Afghanistan Task Force of the US-based Century Foundation suggested as part of its comprehensive solution. The proposal for such a UN role, however, has not yet been supported by America.²¹

In the meantime, an idea is being floated among American policymakers as the “Blackwill plan”, which may more effectively deal with insurgencies in the country, but seems to propagate the fragmentation and partitioning of Afghanistan along ethnic Pashtun fault lines. The plan proposes that

20 *South Asia Mail*, “Manmohan addresses Afghan parliament”, <http://www.southasiainmail.com/news.php?id=98483>, accessed July 14th 2011.

21 Lakhdar Brahimi, Thomas R. Pickering et al., *Afghanistan: Negotiating Peace*, report of the Century Foundation International Task Force on Afghanistan in Its Regional and Multilateral Dimensions, New York, Century Foundation Press, March 2011, http://www.tcf.org/publications/2011/3/afghanistan-negotiating-peace/get_pdf.

America transfer its troops from the southern and south-eastern provinces of Afghanistan, leaving them to Taliban rule, to the northern regions inhabited by non-Pashtuns. Regional sceptics would see this plan as America supporting the reintegration of the Taliban into the government without a genuine inter-ethnic reconciliation and with perhaps some key human rights being violated. Pakistan would then exercise control over Pashtun areas through the Taliban in Kabul, and Western influence would move to the northern regions, too close for comfort for the Central Asian states and Russia. A north/south partition scheme may in any case no longer be viable, as the Taliban have already become operational in the north, including in Nuristan and Takhar Provinces. A similar proposal, voiced by the National Congress of Afghanistan political party, is for a federal system, where the Taliban rule over their southern Pashtun provinces, while other areas achieve autonomy. This is likely to be unworkable. It also seems to be an ethnocentric, condescending proposition that assumes that the Afghan governance system is ready to be decentralised, that Afghanistan is not a united nation that deserves a modern state, and that the people of the south unanimously want Taliban rule.

Conclusion: towards a regional solution

Genuine reconciliation among the ethnic groups within Afghanistan, and concessions and security guarantees at the regional level between countries both need an overall strategic plan and not ad hoc backroom deals.

Writings on the possibility of a regional settlement in Afghanistan focus on how Pakistan should or should not be engaged. Much attention is also paid to the need for a negotiated guarantee of Afghanistan's non-alignment and neutrality vis-à-vis its neighbours, so that the territory of Afghanistan is not used for proxy wars. Any future agreement would indeed require dealing with the insecurities and anxieties of neighbouring countries whose rivalries are played out in Afghanistan. Security guarantees, however, cannot be bestowed by an extra-regional power; they must be developed organically by resuming political dialogue and intensifying economic relations among the countries of the region. The process can also be facilitated by regional and international organisations if further cooperation can be achieved

among NATO, the SCO, the OSCE, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Economic Cooperation Organisation and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. Political will, however, is the main factor in any reconciliation process. In this regard, the resumption of the India-Pakistan dialogue is a positive development.

Regional rivalries call for reassurances that Afghan territory will not be used as the base for aggression towards a competing state. Yet such a guarantee for neighbouring countries must also include the promise that Afghanistan will not become a base from which NATO or American troops conduct military or intelligence operations against Pakistan, Iran, or Russian interests in Central Asia.

Because the American presence is perceived as a destabilising factor in the region, America is key to a regional solution. With the killing of Osama bin Laden, America showed its capabilities and commitment to go after its prime terrorist enemy in a covert operation that will be recognised historically as the last battle to end the global war on terrorism. The real challenge ahead is how much spirit of cooperation and coordination America can extend in a zone that includes emerging economic powerhouses as well as both current and potential nuclear states. This is a rapidly changing environment characterised by the more aggressive involvement of China and Russia with the region, and ambitions for regional leadership by Iran. In the final analysis, the end of Osama bin Laden should ideally occasion the beginning of diplomacy.

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