

A Diplomatic Surge in Afghanistan, 2011–14

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THE NORTH Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states and their coalition partners—encompassing some 40 democracies—are not the only players with high stakes in the current war for Afghanistan. Influential players such as Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India, and China all have legitimate interests.¹ Without a commensurate multilateral diplomatic surge, efforts toward lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan will most likely fail. But the potential of international cooperation in facilitating a long-term political settlement in that country remains woefully under-exploited. Diplomatic cooperation among the main external players, along with coalition forces, will be essential to success in the Afghan campaign. Only by tapping into the global convergence of interests in Afghanistan can the United States and its NATO–ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) partners hope for a political victory or, at the very least, an international environment conducive to the conflict's peaceful resolution.

The strife in Afghanistan is variously conceived as an Afghan civil war, an inter-Pashtun ethnic conflict, or an Islamist upheaval. No consensus presently exists on the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan, neither in academic literature nor within NATO–ISAF headquarters.² The focus here is not on the military operations and campaigns which make up the international intervention in Afghanistan *per se*, nor does it pretend to contribute to these debates in any meaningful way. Instead, this analysis frames the war from an international relations perspective. This approach has thus far been conspicuously absent in many existing accounts of the conflict. An assessment of the various international interests in Afghanistan, even one as geographically limited as that offered here, can aid academics and policymakers in reconceptualizing Afghanistan as a country

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whose security needs must be met by more complex instruments than the application of military power alone—including reconstruction and development assistance, governance reform, and diplomatic engagement. The Obama administration's call for "a wide-ranging diplomatic strategy to build support for our efforts," which conceives of the Afghan-Pakistani (AFPAK) region not only as a battlefield, but also as a "theater for diplomacy," is a step in the right direction.³ This analysis, in four parts, focuses on the latter aspect of international efforts to rebuild a viable Afghan state, namely that of diplomatic engagement.

This article first explores the pivotal role of interventionism by great powers in perpetuating political violence in Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–89) and the Afghan civil war of the 1990s. Next, it seeks to convey a detailed picture of the complex web of international relationships and great-power interests currently affecting the coalition's war effort in Afghanistan. Third, it supports the case that Afghanistan's international context is as important as military facts on the ground in providing long-term security for the Afghan state and people. I argue that a more energetic "diplomatic surge" should be a fundamental part of an eventual American and NATO–ISAF military drawdown. If Western troop-providing states are unable or unwilling to assist the Afghan state in the diplomatic realm—once international soldiers and journalists begin returning home—the Afghans could face the troubling prospect of repeating the tragic historical precedent set by the Soviet Union. Finally, I offer practical policy recommendations on what Western powers and regional partners can do to help Afghanistan reach a lasting political settlement.

Great-Power Conflict in Afghanistan: From Colonial to Civil Wars

At this early stage, we must confront a predictable hurdle. There is an unfortunately widespread historical observation-turned-cliché—dubbed "the mother of all clichés" by Christian Caryl—that all foreign interventions in Afghanistan have been doomed from the start.⁴ If Afghanistan indeed is the "graveyard of empires," many analysts ask why then should this time be any different?⁵ According to this tautological and unidimensional narrative, all external powers which intervened in Afghan affairs—from Alexander the Great to the Red Army—were *inevitably* defeated and expelled. The international systemic context of each intervention was thus irrelevant, the

historical setting unimportant. Such minutia as the differences between an imperial Briton, internationalist Russian, and American grunt are viewed as practically immaterial to those sharing this viewpoint. However, the strategic interests of foreign involvement in Afghanistan should not be generalized. The systemic context of each intervention, including that by NATO–ISAF, is arguably as important as military facts on the ground in explaining changes in the Afghan political scene. The US–Soviet proxy confrontation of the 1980s in Afghanistan is a poignant example thereof.

Since its imperial heyday, Russia has had profound security interests in Central Asia. It was from fear of Russian expansionary designs on its treasured imperial crown jewel—British India—that the United Kingdom ventured into Afghanistan in the first place.⁶ Some theories hold that Moscow was interested in acquiring a warm-water port for its fleet to circumvent the inconveniences of its other naval facilities.⁷ Russian interests in Afghanistan lasted well into the Soviet period, reaching its apex when a Marxist regime took control of Kabul in 1978. Reacting to this news, the US Embassy in Afghanistan cabled a message home which read: “The Russians have finally won the ‘Great Game’.”⁸ Almost immediately, however, the atheistic People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan was faced with a popular resistance from the predominantly Islamic Afghan population surrounding its communist island of Kabul. Keeping true to its Brezhnev Doctrine, the USSR asserted its “right and duty” to go to war in foreign countries “if and when an existing socialist regime was threatened.”⁹ This intervention began the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979–89.

Washington spearheaded the international movement to fund, equip, and train the Afghan Mujahedeen. This was an opportunity “of giving the USSR its Vietnam War,” in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, to demoralize and bleed the Red Army dry.¹⁰ That is essentially what had occurred by 1989, when most Soviet troops had withdrawn from Afghanistan.¹¹ But Afghanistan had been just another proxy conflict of the Cold War, and once the Soviets left, the United States shifted its focus to more-pressing foreign policy issues such as German reunification. The war, as far as wars go, had been horribly traumatic and destructive for the country. It had decimated essential infrastructure and agricultural goods and killed upwards of one million Afghans.¹² After all of this, the champion of anti-Soviet resistance—the United States—simply left the scene. Some American policymakers argued that if Afghanistan were to escape the vicious cycle of poverty and insecurity, it could only do so with strong economic

support from Washington.¹³ The alternative, they warned, would be continued chaos. They only represented a minority view, however, and the US government contented itself with buying back high-technology weapons which had been supplied to Afghan warlords to avoid them being used against American targets in the future.¹⁴ In 1992, a dangerous power vacuum and ongoing civil war finally engulfed the fragile Kabul government.

The addition of pronounced security interests from Europe and the United States since the start of the current intervention in October 2001 only complicated what was already an internationalized civil war in Afghanistan. There is significant evidence to suggest that the US government was planning to dislodge the Taliban from Kabul, by force if necessary, even prior to 9/11. Indeed, Pres. George W. Bush's National Security Council (NSC) had already agreed, one day *before* the 11 September 2001 attacks, to a program of covertly overthrowing the Taliban if necessary.¹⁵ But this foreign intervention in Afghanistan was not an exclusively Anglo-American enterprise. Foreign powers such as India, Russia, Iran, and probably Turkey had already joined the United States in providing financial and, most likely, military support to the war effort of the Northern Alliance—a majority ethnic Tajik group of soldiers fighting against the Taliban. These joint operations were based in neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, suggesting the open cooperation of these two states.¹⁶ The fact that covert anti-Taliban efforts by a loose coalition of states existed prior to 9/11 does not necessarily legitimize them with regards to international law and the norm of nonintervention in other states' affairs,¹⁷ but it does suggest that more than narrowly American strategic interests were at stake in Afghanistan. The international support lent to the Northern Alliance, as well as its predecessors, crossed many conventional diplomatic lines. Paradoxically, this phenomenon is central to understanding how great-power interests could be channeled to bring about a lasting political solution to the seemingly endless conflict in Afghanistan.

Why Russia is Part of the Solution

Today, a major regional player which the US-led coalition has little choice but to rely on is the Russian Federation. The direct threat to Russian security posed by an unstable Afghanistan did not end in 1989 but remained to plague the Russian Federation in its fledgling days. A simple formula terrified Pres. Boris Yeltsin and his entourage. Islamic extremism

plus Chechnya, they feared, would result in Muslim separatism and the ultimate breakup of the federation. Although exaggerated by xenophobic nationalists, these fears did have foundations in reality, with both Islamic foreign fighters and finance drifting to Russia's unstable southern borders during the 1990s. This two-pronged attack originated in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ Furthermore, in 1993 Russia became embroiled in the brutal Tajik civil war when its peacekeepers were ambushed by Afghan Mujahedeen operating in the area. Moscow's response was to send in 25,000 troops by 1995 and close the Tajik-Afghan border.¹⁹ That is proof of how seriously Moscow took the threat of an Islamic jihad against Russia.

By 1999, the official *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* pinpointed interference in Russia's domestic affairs, most notably in Chechnya, by Taliban and other Islamic supporters as "one of the main external threats to Russian security."²⁰ This should be puzzling at a time when Russia's relations with the United States and the NATO alliance in particular were at their post-Cold War low. This suggests that Afghanistan has been well and truly on the minds of Russian policymakers since the breakup of the Soviet Union. The highest echelon of the Russian military brass, in particular, obsessed about the potential threats emanating from the Muslim South—as well as the Asian East—more so than from the Euro-American West.²¹ This could also explain why Moscow continued to wage a covert war against the Taliban alongside the United States until the 2001 intervention. One author even spoke of a division of labor between America and Russia in the war against the Taliban. The United States would bomb the Taliban infrastructure, and the Russians would equip, train, and aid the NA (Northern Alliance). The last time this level of military cooperation between Washington and Moscow occurred was 1945.²²

Officially, no Russian soldiers or advisers were involved in Afghanistan's civil war or thereafter. In reality, Russian support always was and always will be a necessary precondition if coalition forces hope for a favorable outcome to the current war in Afghanistan. At the military level, Russia's GRU intelligence directorate is unsurpassed in its collection network throughout Afghanistan and Iran.²³ Quite simply, US troops may not have been able to topple the Taliban as quickly as they did without Russian intelligence in the autumn of 2001. Furthermore, NATO-ISAF commanders currently rely on Moscow's goodwill to let supplies pass unhindered through its airspace and across Central Asian states to the front line. This was probably due to a deal struck between Vladimir Putin and George

W. Bush in the wake of 9/11. As the first head of state to contact the American president, Putin aligned himself with Bush in the so-called war on terror. In exchange, US criticism toward Russia's treatment of its Chechen separatists became deafeningly silent.²⁴

What are Russia's intentions and interests in the current Afghan war, and how reliable a partner for the coalition is it? Firstly, Russia has a profound interest in once and for all seeing a stable Afghanistan on its southern flank. Aside from Moscow's fears of Islamic terrorists attacking Russia—some justified, others not—Russians are one of the hardest hit populations by the Afghan opium trade. At least 30,000 Russian citizens die each year from the drug, seriously compounding the already drastic state of public health in Russia.²⁵ But Russian policymakers have sent contradictory signals, some expressing their desire to cooperate and others demonstrating the strategic muscle-flexing characteristic of Putin's later foreign policy. This trend was exemplified when the Kyrgyz parliament voted to close a US air base at Manas in early 2009. Around the same time, a generous \$2.15 billion Russian aid deal was offered to Kyrgyzstan.²⁶ "The Russians are trying to have it both ways with respect to Afghanistan," believes Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. "On the one hand you're making positive noises about working with us in Afghanistan, and on the other hand you're working against us in terms of the airfield which is clearly important to us."²⁷ This apparent contradiction is due to the complexity of Russian motives in Afghanistan. Explained Tony Karon,

While Russia can't afford for NATO to fail in Afghanistan, it would not be comfortable seeing the U.S. prevail, boosting its position in Moscow's traditional central Asian backyard—where the increasingly competitive geopolitics of energy supplies has ignited a new "great game" battle for influence between the rival powers. While it needs the Taliban to lose, Moscow doesn't necessarily want NATO to win, as such.²⁸

This Russian duality is a serious impediment to its full cooperation with the NATO–ISAF mission. Geopolitics aside, Russian leaders are also constrained on the home front from aiding the Americans and company more actively. First, the Kremlin has too often portrayed NATO as Russia's military-political nemesis to now justify such overt help.²⁹ This means that a change of heart would certainly be attacked by hard-line nationalists or—more dangerously, an internal Kremlin faction—as proof of a weak government caving in to US power. A more visible presence in Afghanistan would also not go down well with the Russian public who, just

over 20 years ago, experienced the traumatic deaths of 15,000 Soviet soldiers.³⁰ This explains why, on the December 2009 visit to Moscow by NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Russian leadership politely declined a request to increase its logistical support for the coalition intervention in Afghanistan.³¹ If NATO cannot even recruit more Russian helicopters, then what does that portend for Moscow's future cooperation in Afghanistan?

For the foreseeable future, Russian cooperation will hinge upon its own strategic considerations—balancing the rhetoric of Russia's *derzhavnost'* (great-power status) with its Realpolitik interests in Afghanistan. However, judging by the current level of cooperation, we can expect Russia to uphold its quiet but extensive commitment to the coalition's efforts in Afghanistan. Short of a profoundly destabilizing event in NATO-Russian relations, Moscow's interests will prevail over its rhetoric. Admittedly, such an event did occur in August 2008, when the Russo-Georgian war led to NATO freezing its military and diplomatic relations with Russia. The thaw occurred a year later, in June 2009, when both realized the imperiousness of working together in Afghanistan. The message, as NATO secretary-general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer put it, was that "Russia is necessary in the solution for many, many conflicts we see around us unfortunately in this world."³² Finally, if tentatively, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was put back to work. As a sign of the shared interests between NATO and Russia, issues relating to Afghanistan—such as combating the narcotics trade—seem to be the only ones upon which the NRC can agree.³³

There is some irony in Russia helping a US-led coalition in Afghanistan today. Moscow is well aware that its American counterparts, most notably the CIA, funded a covert war against Russia's own Afghan war effort during the 1980s. Today, Russia is well placed to return the favor if a major turn of events so compelled it. Realistically, however, Moscow has a lot to lose from having another Afghan failed state to its south impeding the Kremlin's hopes of reestablishing Russia's credentials as a formidable power in Central Asia. Russian diplomats in Kabul may continue to express "polite *Schadenfreude*," smirking at American misfortunes in Afghanistan,³⁴ but any rhetorical gloating or rattling of sabers by Moscow will most likely not get in the way of its serious cooperation in Afghanistan. A much more challenging partner for NATO-ISAF governments to deal with is the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Pakistan: The Durand Line, India, and “Strategic Depth”

During the covert US war on the Soviets, military and financial support to the Afghan Mujahedeen was also supplied by an alliance of such strange bedfellows as China, France, Great Britain, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and perhaps most surprisingly, even the state of Israel.³⁵ This aid was channeled through Pakistan, whose foreign policy steered a decidedly anti-Soviet course. Hence, direct Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan was pivotal in defeating the Cold War superpower.³⁶ Afghan fighters could take safe refuge in Pakistan’s predominantly Pashtun ethnic group just across the border. As a tactic to block Russian encroachment upon its colonial holdings, Britain had negotiated the Durand Line over a century ago, severing the Pashtuns on either side of the haphazard Afghan-Pakistani border.³⁷ Contemporary observers see in this historical dilemma the seeds of today’s AFPAK strategy. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are geographically artificial states. It is therefore unsurprising that the fault line of these states happens to intersect in the areas of the contemporary Taliban insurgency, the latter being a majority Pashtun movement. Hence, Pakistan’s role is inextricable from the Afghan problem.

Here a perplexing question arises. What impeded Pakistan from tackling its own Taliban stronghold of South Waziristan and the other Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) for so long?³⁸ In one word: India. Islamabad views the region through the prism of its ongoing proxy conflicts against India, the archrival, equally armed with nuclear weapons. India is perceived to be threatening a partition of Pakistani territory—in Kashmir for example—if not its wholesale destruction. During the Afghan civil war and thereafter, Pakistan thus supported the factions which India did not.³⁹ The Pakistani leadership reasoned that by maintaining an “internal balance of weakness” within Afghanistan through its proxies, Islamabad could manipulate this client and keep out the unwelcome influence of New Delhi.⁴⁰ That is essentially how the Taliban gained such prominence, through strong backing from Pakistan and, specifically, its notorious Interservices Intelligence (ISI) directorate.

Problematically for coalition forces, the threat of the Indian enemy has become an institutionalized reality, so much so that Pakistani officials have for decades viewed Afghanistan as “something like the vacant lot behind their house.”⁴¹ This is the essence of Pakistan’s notion of “strategic depth.” As Sarah Chayes explained, “Successive governments in Islamabad postu-

lated Afghanistan as an extension of their territory, land to fade back or retreat to, or base their missiles on, if it ever came to war” with India.⁴² Operating within such a classic security dilemma as Pakistan perceives, it is not certain how long its support for NATO’s mission can last. Is it really in Islamabad’s interest to see a strong, independent, or even worse, India-aligned Afghanistan emerge in the region? At first sight, probably not. And the United States is increasingly disillusioned with its ostensibly staunch regional ally, alleging that Islamabad could be hedging its bets on the outcome of the Afghan war. In the event NATO–ISAF successfully stabilizes Afghanistan, Pakistan could benefit by safeguarding its own territorial integrity vis-à-vis a homegrown Islamist movement. If the Taliban came back to power in Kabul, on the other hand, their influential neighbor could still retain a degree of influence over the course of Afghan foreign policy, at the expense of India.

The Pakistani ISI’s “tentacles” are suspected to stretch deep into neighboring Afghanistan to this day, but the ISI is infuriated by such suggestions. Pakistan would “have the most to lose from a Taliban victory in Kabul,” they counterargue, “because it would inevitably strengthen the Taliban in Pakistan.”⁴³ There is some truth to this. Pakistan’s new approach was demonstrated in October 2009 with a more determined Pakistani attack on its own Taliban in the quasi-autonomous regions bordering Afghanistan. Nevertheless, recently leaked official US Army documents only add to an ever-increasing pile of evidence pointing to direct ISI involvement in supporting the Taliban in killing NATO–ISAF soldiers and Indian workers in Afghanistan. Once again, the ISI has rejected these allegations as “malicious and unsubstantiated,” if not outright “fiction.”⁴⁴ This has only revived the vexing question: On whose side is Pakistan?⁴⁵ It arguably is in Islamabad’s interests to help strengthen the Afghan state and withdraw its support from the Taliban it helped to power. Whether all elements of the Pakistani government agree on this question is another matter altogether. But a concerted regional effort, with pressure from Pakistan’s closest allies—and enemies—might be helping to tip the balance in Islamabad.

India, Iran, and China: Triangulating the Taliban

In the zero-sum game of South Asian geostrategy, what is good for Islamabad must be bad for New Delhi. Thus, India has historically

attempted to deny Pakistan the strategic depth it sought in Afghanistan. According to Kenneth Katzman, “Pakistan is wary that any Afghan government might fall under the influence of India, which Pakistan says is using its diplomatic facilities in Afghanistan to train and recruit anti-Pakistan agents.”⁴⁶ The number of Indian consulates in Afghanistan (9) is deemed to be a direct threat to Pakistani security aimed at that country’s encirclement. But India also has legitimate interests in Afghanistan. Above all, New Delhi fears that a NATO–ISAF withdrawal would free up the Taliban to cross Pakistan’s porous borders and pursue an anti-Indian struggle in Kashmir, or even in Indian cities.⁴⁷ The memory of the 2008 Mumbai attacks serves as a powerful reminder to Indians, as did the 2009 terrorist attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul. Nevertheless, Pakistan would retort that India’s booming defense spending on conventional weapons, as well as higher-yield nuclear warheads, are aggressive to Pakistani security interests.⁴⁸ And so on, and so forth, *ad nauseam*.

The vicious cycle driving India-Pakistan tensions and mistrust has also resulted in Afghanistan becoming caught in the crossfire. It is no exaggeration to claim that Afghanistan’s chronic internal crises since 1989 have been fanned by this regional power competition. “Afghanistan,” in the words of Robert Kaplan, “has been a prize that Pakistan and India have fought over directly and indirectly for decades.”⁴⁹ Because Pakistan fears strategic encirclement by India, it continues to hedge by half-heartedly fighting its own Taliban while supporting those in Afghanistan. Responding to mounting Pakistani pressure on the ground, New Delhi has increased its political-military role in Afghanistan by assigning 500 border guards to protect Indian reconstruction workers, inaugurating an air base in neighboring Tajikistan, and supporting Iran’s Chabahar port as an alternative to Pakistan’s Chinese-backed-and-built Gwadar port.⁵⁰ In turn, Pakistan sees its own dreaded encirclement being realized by these moves and increases its destructive activities in Afghanistan. Logically enough, then, “India-Pakistan relations are in many ways key to the peace in the region,” as Julian Lindley-French suggested.⁵¹ To say so is to say it all, and thus, nothing specific. No easy fix exists, but in the case of Afghanistan, the wider regional framework is the key. In the end, India and Pakistan will have to at least grudgingly be forced to admit that they share a common threat in a fundamentalist Taliban regime returning to power in Kabul—one over which not even the ISI would be able to regain mastery.

Iran is an equally important player in an eventual region-wide Afghan peace agreement. Traditionally, prerevolutionary Iran had enjoyed cordial relations with both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In fact, during the 1970s the Shah's Iran was something of a regional anti-Soviet bulwark and a pro-United States "regional gendarme."⁵² But the twin revolutions in Kabul (1978) and Tehran (1979) turned things around drastically. The fundamentalist Islamic cleric at the head of the country saw geopolitics in pseudo-religious terms. The United States was the "Great Satan," Israel the "Little Satan," and the atheistic Soviet Union—which occupied Muslim lands in Central Asia—the "Red Satan."⁵³ After the Soviet invasion of neighboring Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran entered an alliance of convenience with both the Great and the Little Satans to fund the Afghan Mujahedeen. Once their common (Red Satan) enemy was vanquished, however, Iran was left searching for an Afghan policy in the early 1990s. That is precisely when relations with Pakistan began deteriorating.

There was a prominent ethno-sectarian element to the dispute. Pakistan's Pashtun population, "well-represented in the army and the bureaucracy," felt empathy for the plight of their ethnic neighbors across the Durand Line.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Iran supported the non-Pashtun peoples in western Afghanistan. In turn, Iranian contacts with the Shiite minority of Afghanistan greatly irritated the orthodox Sunni Muslims of Pakistan.⁵⁵ However, the nascent Iran-Pakistan rivalry for influence in Afghanistan was principally about their conflicting geopolitical interests. Both states competed for access to resource-rich Central Asian markets, with Afghanistan—an ideal transit state of the said resources—once more falling victim to a regional power struggle. This geopolitical competition between Iran and Pakistan, according to Andreas Wilde, "contributed greatly to the escalation of the Afghan civil war."⁵⁶ Only when the Taliban came to prominence in Afghanistan, though, did their not-so-diplomatic relations deteriorate irrevocably. Iran, seeing a threat in this Sunni Islamist movement, sponsored its Northern Alliance foes. But Pakistan continued to bank on its Taliban proxies, further inflaming Iranian fears of Pakistan dominating Kabul. The result, as Afghan journalist Musa Khan Jalalzai noted, is that prior to the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan by the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, erstwhile allies Pakistan and Iran were "fighting a proxy war there, a painful and devastating irony."⁵⁷ Iran was even on the cusp of an interstate war with Afghanistan in 1998, after the

Taliban—with suspected Pakistani backing—murdered Iranian diplomats and journalists in Mazar-i-Sharif.⁵⁸

Complicating matters further are historic US–Iran tensions. The Islamic Republic of Iran, for all its rhetorical follies,⁵⁹ does have legitimate security concerns. For one, since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Iran has been faced with “tens of thousands of U.S. troops on either side of its border,” as Fareed Zakaria writes.⁶⁰ Iran thus feels encircled by Washington’s allegedly aggressive grand strategy. Under the Obama administration, the open hand was extended to Tehran in an attempt to gain Iran’s help on a host of issues. The alleged covert Iranian nuclear weapons program remains the most salient stumbling block for Washington and its allies. But it might not always be so.⁶¹ The United States is painfully aware that Iran is an important regional power which, if it desired, could easily activate friendly militias in Afghanistan and Iraq, thus reversing coalition gains in both countries.⁶² Iran would be committing an act of political self-immolation due to its strong anti-Taliban feelings, but that does not preclude it from doing so to harm American interests. Inevitably, as Dr. Amin Saikal argued, a US–Iranian rapprochement is the basis for a regional diplomatic front to open up against the Taliban.⁶³ But the chances of this happening, in the short term, are slim to nil. More and more evidence is accumulating to suggest that Iran has actively trained Afghan insurgents for the sole purpose of killing coalition troops.⁶⁴ This does not bode well for a regional diplomatic strategy involving Iran.

Finally, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is the last major actor whose increased political involvement would benefit Afghanistan’s security. China has historically enjoyed close relations with Pakistan, and hence, antagonistic ones with India.⁶⁵ Today, the lines have been blurred by the situation in Afghanistan. Beijing does not sympathize with the Taliban,⁶⁶ a movement likely to stir unrest among the Muslim Uighur populations of Xinjiang Province. After all, Afghanistan shares a very narrow border with the PRC. The geographical anomaly of the thin Wakhan Corridor has intertwined Afghan–Chinese relations. Although largely peaceful, this area could serve as an illegal passage for Afghan Islamists into China or, alternatively, as a supply route in the war against the Taliban.⁶⁷ Whether the PRC chooses to input more into the regional effort to stabilize Afghanistan remains unclear, especially in light of Beijing’s long-espoused value of noninterference in the affairs of other states. Some posit that China’s contingency plan involves striking a deal with the Taliban. Hence,

Beijing's hedging strategy has resulted in the PRC being, and planning on remaining, "well-positioned to resume its traditional policy of dealing with whichever government is in Kabul."⁶⁸ This is the principle reason why Beijing seeks to avoid alienating any future government in Afghanistan by overtly aiding the NATO-ISAF coalition, should this intervention fail.

Beijing does possess vital strategic interests in the region, the most important being Central Asian political stability for its resource security. The PRC follows a strategy of diversifying its energy imports away from the unstable Persian Gulf states, whose resources must travel over the sea lanes of the Indian and Pacific Oceans at high risk of naval interdiction by unfriendly powers.⁶⁹ Overland transit of natural resources from the Central Asian supplier states, including Kazakhstan, is therefore a priority, as is the stability of the region's political regimes. Secondly, as China dramatically increases its economic investments in Afghanistan, so do its political and security interests in that country deepen. The PRC has already invested some \$3.5 billion in copper mining in the Afghan Lughar province,⁷⁰ as well as \$5 billion in copper mines near Kabul.⁷¹ Additionally, the recent discovery of lucrative cobalt deposits in Afghanistan might attract further Chinese investment. But apart from cold, geo-economic calculus, the PRC is asking itself what a US defeat in Afghanistan would cost its own interests and whether Chinese soldiers could be used to fill a post-American security vacuum in that country if the PRC's Central Asian energy strategy were at risk.⁷² This suggests that coalition governments have room to maneuver in lobbying China for greater support in Afghanistan.

The Road Ahead in Afghanistan: Toward a Diplomatic Surge?

So what do Tehran, New Delhi, and Beijing have in common? Quite simply, they have a common enemy in the Taliban. But all three states are also wary, to varying degrees, of seeing an indefinite US presence in Central Asia. Hence, what has emerged in recent years is an Iran-India-China axis of sorts, which effectively triangulates the Taliban and confines them to the AFPAK region.⁷³ The development of this strange entente cordiale came as a shock to Pakistan, whose "closest allies, China and Iran, were in a meaningful partnership with India, its worst adversary."⁷⁴ For NATO-ISAF planners, however, this is not necessarily bad news. By engaging these three regional powers in pressuring Pakistan, the latter may find it

impossible to withhold its unconditional support to the anti-Taliban effort. Through continued intransigence, Islamabad would risk international isolation from even the PRC, while losing the soft-power battle for prestige with India. That is clearly not in Pakistan's interests, howsoever defined.

The Afghan problem, it seems, almost inevitably comes back to the all-important role of Pakistan. Because of its porous border with Afghanistan, Pakistan is frustrating coalition efforts to pursue the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Pakistan, in its mutual competition with India, is fueling regional insecurity. Finally, through its asymmetrical disputes with Iran,⁷⁵ Pakistan is alienating its own allies. This explains why NATO–ISAF commanders acknowledge that they are dealing with two sides of the same coin. Pakistan does have a lot to lose from a coalition failure in Afghanistan, not least of which could be its very territorial integrity, or the loss of the United States as a staunch ally.⁷⁶ Pakistani strategists have recently signaled to their American counterparts that a certain *quid pro quo* might be on the agenda involving financial aid in exchange for a more resolute attitude against the Taliban elements on their soil who exploit the porousness of the Durand Line.⁷⁷ It remains to be seen how these negotiations pan out.

Islamabad also faces more practical problems caused by the continuing conflict in Afghanistan, such as a renewed influx of Afghan refugees. Although close to 2 million have returned from Pakistani camps since 2002, some 300,000 or so remain across the border. Iran faces a similar problem, with up to 1.2 million Afghans living in squalid conditions within its jurisdiction.⁷⁸ Aside from humanitarian considerations, both Tehran and Islamabad incur considerable costs from attending to the basic needs of that many extra human beings. According to estimates by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the economic burden of Afghan refugees to the Iranian state was of the order of \$352 million *prior to* the 2001 resumption of hostilities.⁷⁹ A peaceful solution to Afghanistan's wars, which have now destabilized the region for some 30 years, should be welcomed by most of that country's near and distant neighbors. And it is within reach. The foreign policies of the aforementioned states—Russia, Pakistan, India, China, and Iran—are pivotal to the establishment of a positive peace settlement to the decades-long Afghan quandary. A successful diplomatic strategy must involve all of these major players.

There is no linear road to success in Afghanistan, but there is nothing inherently “unwinnable” about the Afghan war at the strategic level either. History has not doomed the intervention, but policy choices since 2001—

such as focusing on Iraq at the expense of Afghanistan—have certainly not helped.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the current intervention in Afghanistan does possess one major advantage over previous counterinsurgencies in that country and elsewhere. During the Soviet foray into Afghanistan, Moscow's attempt to reconstruct the Afghan state (in its own image) was "permanently dogged by a perceived lack of international legitimacy, and by a non-benign regional security environment," as Alex Marshall explained. In this environment, all of the main actors, including China, Iran, Pakistan, and the United States, "conspired to varying degrees to undermine the whole Soviet effort."⁸¹ In today's intervention, however, international legitimacy and regional interests are not lacking, but political will is. According to Henry Kissinger,

the special aspect of Afghanistan is that it has powerful neighbors or near-neighbors—Pakistan, India, China, Russia, Iran. Each is threatened in one way or another and, in many respects, more than we [the United States] are by the emergence of a base for international terrorism: Pakistan by Al Qaeda; India by general jihadism . . . China by fundamentalist Shiite jihadists in Xinjiang; Russia by unrest in the Muslim south; even Iran by the fundamentalist Sunni Taliban.⁸²

But Kissinger goes on to note that, so far, these regional powers have largely stayed "more or less aloof."⁸³ His argument is not so much about imposing a rehashed version of the infamous Domino Theory upon Afghanistan and Muslim countries more generally, as his critics have argued.⁸⁴ Rather, Kissinger's point is that coalition governments, if they hope for any measure of success, will need to actively engage neighboring states to reconstruct and firmly "anchor" Afghanistan to its regional environment. That is why a diplomatic surge must accompany and eventually supersede the US military surge. All of those aforementioned states should be engaged diplomatically, at the highest level, by the Obama administration as well as its European allies. We should remember that it took a large coalition of states during the Soviet-Afghan war to fund the Mujahedeen and ultimately eject the Soviets from Afghanistan. Paradoxically, only such a coalition today can effectively prevent a return of the Taliban in Kabul—namely by starving the insurgents of much-needed international funds, weapons, and legitimacy.

As of January 2010, the United States seemed to have come around to the idea of a diplomatic surge, lobbying Afghanistan's closest and regional neighbors for support.⁸⁵ Such positive developments, however, should not give rise to unwarranted idealism. Some serious questions remain unanswered.

Moscow would struggle trying to sell a second Russian-Afghan war to the public, even if it were portrayed as necessary to defend the security of the Russian Federation.⁸⁶ Furthermore, if the Iranian nuclear issue comes to a dramatic conclusion, as Israelis envisage,⁸⁷ then could Russia sustain its support for NATO–ISAF in Afghanistan at the expense of its partnership with Iran? Will Pakistan stray from its current course through different agencies in Islamabad, resuming to place bets on both sides? The war will be decided on the battlefield, but it could just as well be decided at home, where a premature pullout by any reluctant European ally could have untold consequences for the mission.⁸⁸ For the moment, there are more questions than answers. There are some practical policy steps which can be implemented, however, beginning in July 2011 to help embed Afghanistan into a sustainable and more or less benign framework of regional and international relations.

Recommendations

Five principal policy recommendations emerge from this discussion. The most immediate US and NATO–ISAF diplomatic goal should be to show recognition where it is due but punish negative behavior where necessary. This would positively encourage international contributions to Afghanistan’s security, while assuring these partner states that their interests are being taken into account. For Russia, as an example, this means acting on Moscow’s concerns about the Afghan poppy trade. Russian officials have been suggesting for several years that NATO implement an “anti-drug security belt” around Afghanistan.⁸⁹ This initiative should be taken seriously. If predominantly Russian soldiers were to guard this “belt” with the help of Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian states—perhaps in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—then this might avail to be one of the most practical steps in advancing regional cooperation. Additionally, Russia wants the production and smuggling of Afghan opium to “be classified as a threat to international peace and security.”⁹⁰ It already is in all but name, as a recent UN report highlighted, costing up to 100,000 lives around the world each year and ultimately financing the Taliban insurgency.⁹¹ The United States and its NATO–ISAF partners should oblige. If this were the case, Russia would see its interests even more aligned with those of the United States in Afghanistan and might be inclined to reciprocate in terms of increased political and mili-

tary aid to the Kabul government. Such a move should evidently be undergirded by the explicit approval of neighboring states for the temporary stationing of international forces on their territories.

Concerning Pakistan, coalition governments must encourage Islamabad's potential mediation efforts between the Afghan government and certain reconcilable Taliban elements.⁹² An upsurge in Afghan-Pakistani military cooperation, as has recently been the case, should also be welcomed by Washington and its allies. It would be a mistake to view Pakistan's role in Afghanistan in solely zero-sum terms. Pakistan always has and always will be Afghanistan's most important neighbor; Western troops are only there temporarily. NATO-ISAF governments should nevertheless proceed with caution, as Pakistan is for all intents and purposes a party to the Afghan conflict. The United States should therefore seek to balance the conflicting priorities of encouraging Islamabad's mediation efforts among Afghan factions while limiting Pakistan from playing the role of privileged mediator. Any delaying or blocking tactics by Islamabad could all too easily frustrate any hopes of a peaceful Afghan settlement. Moscow's failed attempt to negotiate with Pakistan on a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan should serve as a cautionary tale.⁹³ With this in mind, the US administration—by virtue of its close working relations with both governments—should seek to convince the Afghan and Pakistani leaderships that it is in everyone's interests that they draw closer. The trilateral Afghan-Pakistan-US meeting is a sound building block. But, Washington must signal clear red lines, which include firmly opposing Pakistan's use of proxies in Afghanistan, its efforts to seek strategic depth and compete with India there, its lax treatment of Pakistani terrorists, as well as insisting that both states effectively desectarianize their relations. This last step should dissuade Islamabad from pursuing an ethno-sectarian divide-and-conquer strategy in Afghanistan, and it would send a strong signal to Tehran. To avoid alienating New Delhi, however, India should be encouraged to participate with Pakistan and Afghanistan, expanding upon Afghan president Hamid Karzai's concept of a "tripolar structure of cooperation."⁹⁴ This might even act as a practical confidence-building measure between India and Pakistan, potentially undermining the logic of their zero-sum competition in Afghanistan.

The other side of the equation is punishing destructive meddling, by both Pakistan and Iran. The former, enticed by American aid, can be threatened with the drying up of economic and technology transfers from

the United States. Should that fail, there is a Plan B, to which we will return. Meanwhile Iran, which has once again been sanctioned by the UN Security Council, may or may not be reconsidering its Janus-faced strategy. On the one hand, Iran's Afghan policy is generally benign, consisting of investing in Afghanistan and drawing the predominantly Shiite Hazaras of western Afghanistan closer to the Iranian economic and political orbit.⁹⁵ The United States should recognize that its interests converge significantly with those of Iran in Afghanistan and show appreciation for Tehran's constructive role as a generous investor in Afghan infrastructure and the third-largest donor country—pledging some \$560 million at the 2002 Tokyo conference.⁹⁶ One way to show appreciation would be for the Obama administration to engage in unofficial, bilateral talks free of preconditions with Iran, at least on issues relating to Afghanistan, and to abandon all Bush-era insinuations or direct threats of regime change against Tehran.⁹⁷

On the other hand, despite the agnosticism of some experts on the issue,⁹⁸ Iran is probably supplying some Taliban factions to kill and maim NATO–ISAF troops, if only as a message of what it is capable and willing to do. As is the case with Pakistan, the more evidence that accumulates suggesting some form of direct or indirect Iranian support for Taliban factions in Afghanistan, the shriller becomes official denial.⁹⁹ If Tehran continues down this path, one option which Machiavelli might have advocated would be to retaliate by arming separatist rebels in Sistan-Balochistan,¹⁰⁰ but this is by no means a desirable solution, potentially inflaming tensions into a proxy conflict with Iran over Afghanistan. Moreover, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is already accusing Washington of such covert subversion, using this as an excuse to lambast the NATO–ISAF intervention in Afghanistan and encourage Afghan president Karzai to imitate Iranian anti-Westernism, as demonstrated during their March 2010 bilateral meeting in Kabul.¹⁰¹ Instead, the United States and coalition governments can make the best of an existing diplomatic crisis by courting Moscow, whose participation in this strategy would be more likely if its anti-narcotic concerns were heeded.

Russia could conceivably pressure Iran to recognize that cooperation, rather than strategic competition, is the best way forward in Afghanistan. President Ahmadinejad was incensed by the Russian participation in the most recent UN sanctions against Tehran's nuclear enrichment program, even threatening one of his few international allies that Moscow could

soon be joining the long list of Tehran's "historic enemies."¹⁰² Although Moscow is known to tread lightly in offending its Iranian partners, it could feasibly let it be known that threatening Russian (and Chinese) interests in Afghanistan will have consequences—such as losing any chances of purchasing the Russian S-300 defensive missile system, as well as becoming estranged from its great-power sponsors in the Security Council. The current climate in NATO-Russia relations is looking promising, with Russia having strongly reaffirmed the alignment of shared interests in Afghanistan.¹⁰³ This means that the time for a diplomatic offensive should be sooner rather than later. Importantly, if Iran were to counter by threatening Russia's lucrative arms trade to that country, then NATO should swiftly move to guarantee that it would open its Euro-Atlantic markets to Russian weapons—fulfilling one of Moscow's foreign policy ambitions.¹⁰⁴

Secondly, the United States and coalition governments should urgently seek to establish a broad regional framework to assist and negotiate an eventual Afghan political settlement. As we have seen, USSR-US, India-Pakistan, Iran-Pakistan, Iran-US, and to a lesser extent, India-China competition have all contributed to the perpetuation of war on Afghan soil. There is therefore a dire need to first bring all of the *external* parties to the Afghan war around a common table to reach a minimum understanding of their common interests to facilitate the *internal* Afghan peace process. Evidently, interests will not always coincide, sometimes not at all. On the basic question of recognizing the Taliban in a coalition Afghan government, there is no visible solution to cramming the categorical intransigence of Iran, Russia, and probably India with the more amenable flexibility of China, the positive zeal of Pakistan, and the continuing ambivalence of the United States into a coherent strategy.¹⁰⁵ In any case, the best way forward might be a common hands-off approach in which these international powers do not prescribe a solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, which would surely be vetoed by one or more of the interested parties.

Instead, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, India, China, and the United States should agree to create an ad hoc, consultative mechanism among themselves, plus the Afghan government and moderate antigovernment factions, which could help the Afghans bargain with international arbitration. An idea worth exploring would be the addition of one principal mediating state, preferably a Muslim country with presumed neutrality, such as Malaysia.¹⁰⁶ Importantly, all of the major players should be urged in no uncertain terms to discontinue the age-old and faultlessly destruc-

tive tradition of supporting competing Afghan proxies on the battlefield. If the interested powers chose to re-embark upon the 1990s policy of free-for-all alliances—exemplified by India reaching out to Iran and Pakistan being supported by China and Saudi Arabia—then this would signal dire news for coalition governments, not to mention for most Afghans. If India, Pakistan, and Iran only competed in a positive-sum game to rebuild Afghanistan's state and public infrastructure, then life would become more joyous, as Stalin enjoyed saying. But that is not the case. A revamped “scramble for Afghanistan” would only make “de facto partition and renewed civil war” an increasingly likely prospect.¹⁰⁷ This scenario must be avoided at all costs.

A third recommendation toward a regional diplomatic strategy, in the short-to-medium term, is to facilitate a rapprochement between NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Traditionally, NATO had refused to recognize and establish equal relations with the SCO and the CSTO out of fear of recognizing a de facto Russo-Chinese sphere of influence in Eurasia. As of 2010, however, there were some signals that NATO was considering formalizing links with these two security organizations in its New Strategic Concept.¹⁰⁸ This would aid Afghanistan's long-term stability in a number of ways, not least of which would be the previously mentioned contingency plan for dealing with Pakistan's potentially renewed intransigence vis-à-vis the Taliban. The SCO is the ideal organization, if not the only one, which can effectively bring diplomatic pressure to bear on Islamabad, most notably through China's important role therein. Indeed, the Russo-Chinese core of the SCO would be well placed to keep Pakistan in line with international interests in Afghanistan by threatening to withdraw the carrot of SCO membership to Islamabad. (This might also work for Iran, which is likewise a candidate member.)¹⁰⁹ Of course, this is beyond the scope of Euro-American diplomacy, but NATO could make such a situation more likely by seeking official ties with the SCO as well as the CSTO. This recognition need not define geopolitical spheres of influence, which are obsolete and illegal in the eyes of international law and would only benefit Afghanistan's security and the goals of the NATO–ISAF mission.

There exists a particularly specious argument that NATO and the United States should jealously guard their privileged roles in Afghanistan, for fear of Kabul drifting into the Russo-Chinese sphere of influence,¹¹⁰ but this specter is a straw man. Indeed, as Dmitri Trenin and Alexei

Malashenko point out, China and Russia follow two different and often competing positions in Afghanistan, precluding a monolithic SCO bloc policy.¹¹¹ Those who “continue to view SCO–NATO relations primarily through the prism of a new cold war,” as argued by Kaveh Afrasiabi, “miss the point that there is a convergence of interests” in Afghanistan.¹¹² Quite simply, such a policy of isolating the SCO from playing a greater security and political role in Afghanistan—which even the Afghan government hopes for—would be counterproductive, if not outright disastrous. Afghanistan, already an observer state, may conceivably join the SCO one day. This would make sense, recognizing the country’s physical and geopolitical place in the world. NATO is unlikely to extend a competing invitation to Kabul in the near future. In the past, the SCO has served Moscow’s interests in pushing for an end to the US military presence in Central Asia. This strengthened the idea that the SCO was morphing into a competitor to NATO’s security role in Afghanistan and a means to expel an unwanted American influence from the traditional Russian and Chinese spheres of influence.¹¹³

Viewed objectively, however, seeking a rapprochement with the SCO should be a central pillar of any Western diplomatic strategy aimed at leaving Afghanistan on favorable terms. The SCO is admittedly no silver bullet, with its measly budget of \$4 million barring it from playing an active role in the Afghan reconciliation process.¹¹⁴ But it can continue to play a key function as a convener of regional conferences on Afghanistan, as happened in Moscow in March 2009. Furthermore, deepening SCO–Afghanistan cooperation is reaching a level that makes Kabul a potential bridge between NATO and the SCO. An SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group was set up in 2005,¹¹⁵ and the SCO publicly acknowledged at its June 2009 Yekaterinburg summit that drug trafficking, terrorism, and transnational crime originating in Afghanistan posed “a threat to the whole international community.”¹¹⁶ NATO–SCO cooperation in Afghanistan might also set a precedent for win-win cooperation in other areas of common interest, such as Kyrgyzstan and even the Pacific.¹¹⁷

Fourthly, to allay Russian, Chinese, Iranian, Pakistani, and probably Afghan fears, the United States and NATO ought to publicly and privately reassure these governments that Washington and its allies do not seek long-term geopolitical advantages by leaving behind a permanent military footprint in Afghanistan. Although the semiofficial 2011–14 withdrawal timetable may have helped in this regard, there should be an

explicit commitment from Washington that it will only remain in Afghanistan as long as it is needed and accepted by Kabul. In return, this would make it more feasible for pragmatic Chinese policymakers to justify playing an increased political role in this country. The PRC, which is widely seen in Western capitals as free riding “on the back[s] of dead European, American and Afghan soldiers,” would be in a better position to contribute more political—even if not military—assistance to the intervention.¹¹⁸ For example, Beijing is capable of contributing to the training of the Afghan National Police and increasing technical study subsidies for Afghan students in the People’s Republic. In the longer-term, as Richard Weitz argues, the paradox of the PRC’s asymmetric economic-political commitment to Afghanistan might mean that increasing Chinese participation becomes practically unavoidable.¹¹⁹ NATO–ISAF should welcome such a role, not reject it on the grounds of a larger China threat.

One may object, however, that the likelihood of such positive-sum multilateral involvement in Afghanistan coming so seamlessly to fruition is remote at best. Will not the interests of one or more parties negatively impact upon those of other players? They most likely will. Iran may continue to arm the Taliban. India and Pakistan may prove irreconcilable in pursuing what, objectively, appears to be common interests. An increased Russian military presence in the states surrounding Afghanistan, even for an allegedly “anti-drug security belt,” may arouse American, Central Asian, and perhaps even Chinese suspicions of Moscow’s alternative motives. Additionally, and despite Western support for Islamabad during the July 2010 floods, increasing NATO–ISAF pressure on Pakistan may encourage that government to perceive itself as “constrained to consider response options.”¹²⁰ The objective of diplomatic engagement is neither to paper over differences nor to lapse into a naïve faith that all of Afghanistan’s neighbors necessarily share benign intentions for that country’s future. Instead, the point is that NATO–ISAF states will need to employ their joint political, economic, and soft-power capabilities—as well as traditional military power—to facilitate a negotiated conclusion to the Afghan war. This strategy of diplomatic persuasion or “co-optive power,” as defined by Joseph Nye, will hinge on the ability of the United States to influence external powers to “define their interests in ways consistent with its own.”¹²¹ Thus, the United States and its coalition partners should aim to convince China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia that: (1) their core interests in Afghanistan (see table 1) converge with those of NATO–ISAF,

(2) inaction or ill-intentioned meddling are harmful responses to this common threat, and (3) a mission failure in Afghanistan and the continued use of Afghan soil for opium fields, terrorist havens, and political violence and instability would be as detrimental to the interests of Afghanistan's neighbors as they are to those of the United States.

Table 1. Analysis of key players' interests in Afghanistan

This matrix presents the key interests and worst-case scenarios of each of the main foreign powers involved in Afghanistan. The fourth column suggests what appears to be—at least on paper—the lowest-common denominator points of consensus, from which a multilateral diplomatic surge could be fashioned.

<i>Player</i>	<i>Interests in Afghanistan</i>	<i>Worst-Case Scenario</i>	<i>Mutually Acceptable Outcome</i>
China	Maintain political stability and resource security in Central Asia; contain potential terrorist threat; stop the United States from establishing a permanent military presence in region	Regional instability; terrorist threat to China (Xinjiang); establishment of permanent US military bases in Afghanistan and/or Kyrgyzstan	Politically stable government of Afghanistan and gradual phasing out of American military presence in Central Asia
India	Deny Pakistan strategic depth; maintain political stability in region; remove potential terrorist threat	Pakistani-dominated Afghan government; regional instability; terrorist threat to India	Afghan government engaged in a trilateral security relationship with India and Pakistan
Iran	Stop Pakistan and/or the United States from establishing a permanent political and military presence in Afghanistan; contain potential terrorist threat; curtail Afghan opium trade	Pakistani/American-dominated Afghan government; terrorist threat to Iran; upsurge in Afghan poppy trade	Militarily nonaligned Kabul government and phased withdrawal of US forces
Pakistan	Counter India's strategic encirclement of Pakistan; contain potential Taliban threat to Pakistani state; end refugee crisis	India-friendly Afghan government; disintegration of Pakistani state under terrorist threat; upsurge of Afghan refugees	Multilaterally inclined Kabul government, stability of Pakistan, and containment of Taliban
Russia	Eliminate Afghan opium trade; remove potential terrorist threat; stop the United States from establishing a permanent military foothold in Central Asia	Upsurge in Afghan poppy trade; terrorist threat to Russia (northern Caucasus); establishment of permanent US military presence in region	Gradual elimination of Afghan opium trade and containment of terrorist threat to Russia
US/ NATO/ ISAF	End political violence in Afghanistan; hand over leading security role to strong, centralized and preferably democratic Afghan government; encourage constructive regional involvement in Afghanistan, but limit meddling if malign	Return of Taliban (and al-Qaeda) to Kabul; destructive foreign meddling; collapse of Afghan state and renewal of civil war	Transfer of security responsibilities to Afghan lead between 2011 and 2014 and internationally mediated political solution to Afghan conflict, with potential Taliban role in decentralized Afghan government

Finally, the fifth recommendation concerns the longer-term objective of assisting Kabul in integrating into its regional system of interstate relations. Afghanistan itself is slowly but surely rising as a regional player. The Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs articulates a vision of a strengthened Afghanistan acting as a bridge between Islam and the West and a model of “Cooperation among Civilizations.”¹²² Such an outcome is obviously far removed for the time being, but regional peace can only be assured when Afghanistan does become such a metaphorical bridge between powerful neighbors rather than their mutual doormat. How to help Kabul achieve that aim? Most importantly, just as in the military sphere, a diplomatic surge must inevitably end with a handover to the Afghan government when it is ready and able to take the lead role in its own affairs. At the moment, 2014 seems like the most likely date for the endgame of NATO–ISAF’s direct military assistance to the government of Afghanistan.¹²³ In practice, however, a diplomatic surge would mean assisting Afghanistan for years to come in modernizing its army and intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities and professionalizing its diplomatic corps. Western powers could also help by encouraging the Afghan government to participate in regional exchanges, including military, parliamentary, and Track 2.0 diplomacy, as well as classical confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy to avert potential interstate crises.

In the near future, however, the foreign intervention in Afghanistan will come to an end. When it does, Washington must let the Afghan state pursue its own foreign policy. The worst which any US president could do in the postconflict stage of the Afghanistan mission would be to attempt to maintain a client-patron relationship à la South Vietnam. If it has not already done so, Washington should discontinue the habit of telephoning Kabul to dictate to the Afghan president what to do or not to do.¹²⁴ Most importantly, the United States should certainly *not* attempt to force a permanent American military or “advisory” presence upon Afghanistan. The adverse consequences of such a magisterial policy include but are not limited to: confirming the central tenets of Taliban propaganda in the eyes of the Afghan people, stifling any lingering soft-power appeal which the United States may enjoy in postconflict Afghanistan, repulsing a strengthened Afghan government away from its erstwhile security guarantor, and forcing Kabul into the fold of such potentially ill-intentioned states as Iran. Indeed, Afghanistan has a long history of neutrality and nonalignment in world affairs. It may or may not resume such a position; but that choice

must be made in Kabul. A consolidated, sovereign, and hopefully democratic Afghan state—if only in a non-Western, tribal sense—should be the sole arbiter of its future place in the world and an international actor in its own right.

Conclusion

The last point brings us full circle. Only with internal stability and security will Afghanistan emerge as a unified and respectable player in regional and world politics. International military assistance will be necessary to prevent a repetition of the Soviet withdrawal, paving the way to a full-fledged civil war. The dilemma facing NATO–ISAF is that a premature disengagement without a clear political-diplomatic solution to the Afghan conflict would risk repeating the Soviet mistake and spark a renewed great-power melee over Afghanistan.¹²⁵ Inevitably, this would once again cause great devastation to the Afghan people.¹²⁶ Hence, hard military power is a necessary short-term solution to some of Afghanistan's most pressing problems, but military power is never an end in itself. Equal consideration should also be given to potential strategies to shape the peace and find a lasting political solution to the deeply entrenched, 30-year Afghanistan conflict.

Diplomacy is stereotypically viewed as the domain of peaceniks and pacifists. In fact, diplomacy may be more accurately, if paradoxically, defined in Clausewitzian terms as the extension of war by other means.¹²⁷ The diplomatic weight and influence of a state—legitimized by its credible use of force—can and should be a central part of Western strategy in Afghanistan and elsewhere. One of NATO–ISAF's strengths—its rapid and flexible response—has proven problematic, as Jamie Shea noted, by virtue of committing military resources to Afghanistan ahead of a clear political and diplomatic strategy to guide the intervention.¹²⁸ Military strategies in the post-9/11 world are too often underpinned by the spoken or unspoken assumption that terrorism can be eradicated like the plague. War is thus seen as a panacea by some strategists, who simply advocate hunting down and killing such and such a group—be they the Taliban or the Islamic Movement Uzbekistan—without providing the least afterthought of how the political situation might pan out, stabilize, or destabilize in the aftermath of such decapitation strikes.¹²⁹

The aim of this article is to stir public and professional debate on the often occulted topic of Afghanistan's international relations. Indeed, a recent report of the Afghanistan Study Group concurred with the findings and recommendations herein: that the Afghan war had "long been exacerbated by outside powers seeking to protect or advance their own interests," that "neighboring states such as India, Pakistan, China, and Iran share a common interest in preventing Afghanistan from either being dominated by any single power or remaining a failed state that exports instability," and that the United States therefore ought to "engage global and regional stakeholders" in the task of rebuilding a viable Afghan state.¹³⁰ This report equally suggested that "abandoning a predominantly military focus could actually facilitate a more energetic diplomatic effort."¹³¹ Hence, one general conclusion we can draw from studying the international aspect of Afghan conflicts, past and present, is that it is a fallacy to assume that the role of diplomacy should be relegated to some ideal "if and when" phase of the intervention in which Afghanistan is a stabilized, safe, and postconflict country. Thinking beyond the urgent political problem of following a withdrawal timetable, it becomes clear that a diplomatic surge is an important instrument of state power that coalition states have so far underutilized to the detriment of their long-term strategic interests. Somewhat counterintuitively, a diplomatic solution may need to precede an internal reconciliation in Afghanistan. Otherwise, any security gains on the ground could systematically and very rapidly be reversed by the self-serving actions of regional powers. If NATO–ISAF governments delay implementing a strategy to maximize the benefits from Afghanistan's currently benign international environment, they run the risk of losing it to a regional upsurge of competitive dynamics.

The attempts under the Obama administration to increase the civilian presence in the international reconstruction and governance efforts in Afghanistan¹³² should only be building blocks toward a stronger role for diplomacy in bringing about a favorable outcome to the war. Today's uncertainty and national debates in coalition countries about whether to stay the course in Afghanistan or "suddenly turn off the lights and let the door close behind us,"¹³³ are at least partly due to this lack of strategic vision.¹³⁴ To be sure, Afghanistan should not be abstracted to a game of geopolitical chess. Neither should it be held hostage to the expedient interests of party politics. Too many lives hang in the balance. Establishing a political-diplomatic strategy for Afghanistan will obviously not, in and of itself,

bring a decisive military victory to NATO–ISAF on the ground. A genuine and stable Afghan political reconciliation against the backdrop of a phased withdrawal of troops, from mid 2011 to approximately 2014, will be much more likely with diplomatic backing and participation of Afghanistan’s powerful neighbors. **SSQ**

Notes

1. Adam Roberts, “Doctrine and Reality in Afghanistan,” in *Survival* 51, no. 1 (February/March 2009): 33.
2. See David Kilcullen, “Conference of Defence Associations Institute 26th Annual Seminar,” *CPAC*, 3 March 2010, <http://www.cpac.ca/forms/index.asp?dsp=template&act=view3&pagetype=vod&lang=e&clipID=3730>.
3. The White House, *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan*, March 2009, 1, 6.
4. For a trenchant counterargument, see Christian Caryl, “Bury the Graveyard,” *Foreign Policy*, 26 July 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/07/26/bury_the_graveyard.
5. See Malou Innocent and Ted Galen Carpenter, *Escaping the “Graveyard of Empires”: A Strategy to Exit Afghanistan* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2009).
6. M. Hassan Kakar, *A Political and Diplomatic History of Afghanistan, 1863–1901* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 160.
7. The Russian ports in the Black Sea are dependent on Turkey’s goodwill, and those in the Baltic and northern Pacific Oceans are not ice free all year round. J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Russian Occupation* (Washington: National Defense University, 1986), 3–5.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Scott McMichael, “The Soviet-Afghan War,” in *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, eds. Robin Higham and Frederick W. Kagan (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 261.
10. Vincent Jauvert, “Oui, la CIA est entrée en Afghanistan avant les Russes,” *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Paris), 15–21 January 1998.
11. To his great surprise, in 1992 Yeltsin was informed that Soviet-era “advisers” had remained behind in Kabul. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 419.
12. This figure includes combatants and civilians. One scholar, M. Hassan Kakar, has accused the occupiers of perpetrating what he termed “genocide” of the local population. The well-researched findings, especially on the Soviet mass killings of noncombatants, are convincing. Soldiers’ accounts also detail the unofficial Red Army policy of taking no Afghan prisoners. Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), <http://www.escholarship.org/editions/view?docId=ft7b69p12h;brand=ucpress>.
13. George Crile, *My Enemy’s Enemy: The Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History—The Arming of the Mujahideen by the CIA* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 522.
14. About 2,000 portable antiaircraft Stinger missiles were supplied to the Mujahedeen since 1985. Between 100 and 200 of these could still be around, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Kenneth Katzman, “Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” in *Afghanistan Issues: Security, Narcotics, and Political Currents*, ed. Eric Gladstone (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2007), 64.

15. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), 205–6, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.
16. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are still central pillars of the US strategy in Afghanistan. On a recent trip to Dushanbe, US envoy to the region, Richard Holbrooke, described Afghanistan's instability as a threat to the entire region, including Pakistan, China, and India. "Holbrooke Says Tajikistan Important for Outcome in Afghanistan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 February 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/Holbrooke_Says_Tajikistan_Important_For_Outcome_In_Afghanistan/1963609.html.
17. For a far-reaching discussion of the "sovereignty" versus "humanitarian intervention" debate, see *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001).
18. Robert Service, *Russia: Experiment with a People, From 1991 to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 2002), 157.
19. Astrid S. Tuminez, *Russian Nationalism since 1856: Ideology and the Making of Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 249.
20. Cited in Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 225–26.
21. Michael Stuermer, *Putin and the Rise of Russia* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 11.
22. Martin McCauley, *Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Modern History* (Harlow and London: Longman, 2002), 154.
23. *Ibid.*, 150–51.
24. *Ibid.*
25. This number, the aforementioned UN report highlights, is more than twice that of Red Army soldiers killed during the 10-year Soviet-Afghan war. UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational threat of Afghan Opium* (Vienna: UNODC, 2009), 1.
26. Ultimately, the United States solved this impasse by increasing the rent paid for the Manas base and simply renaming it, avoiding a potential eviction. Baktybek Abdrisaev, "The Russification of Kyrgyzstan," *Foreign Policy*, 9 April 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4810.
27. Cited in Mark Thompson, "Obama loses a Key Base in Afghanistan," *Time*, 19 February 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1880686,00.html>.
28. Tony Karon, "Russia Puts Price on its Cooperation in Afghanistan," *Time*, 4 February 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1877193,00.html>.
29. Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics*, 216.
30. See, for example, Artyom Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Grove Press, 1990).
31. "NATO fails to gain Russia aid in Afghanistan," *BBC*, 17 December 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8418292.stm>.
32. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, "NATO-Russia Council Resumes Work despite Occupation of Georgia," *You Tube*, 28 June 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsX_CCG9TAo.
33. See "NRC Pilot Project on Counter-Narcotics Training of Afghan and Central Asian Personnel," *NATO-Russia Council*, http://www.nato-russia-council.info/htm/EN/structures_18.shtml.
34. This account also tells of Russian material support to the coalition in Afghanistan, such as Mi-8 helicopters being piloted by Russian crews for purely logistical operations. Rodric Braithwaite, "Afghan Diary," *Survival* 51, no. 1 (February/March 2009): 104.
35. Crile, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 142.

36. Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 2007).
37. McCauley, *Afghanistan and Central Asia*, 141.
38. M. Ilyas Khan, "What are the Waziristan War Aims?" *BBC*, 20 October 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/ukfs_news/hi/newsid_8310000/newsid_8316600/8316670.stm.
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57. Musa Khan Jalalzai, *The Foreign Policy of Pakistan: Sectarian Impacts on Diplomacy* (Lahore: Khan Book Co., 2002), 97.
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