Exploring Common Ground in a Promising Triangle
Improving Regional Dynamics between Afghanistan, Iran, and the United States

After eleven years of profound international involvement, Afghanistan prepares for exercising full sovereignty. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is set to leave the country by the end of 2014, and the transition of responsibility to Afghan authorities will be a decisive caesura for the country. The 2011 Bonn and 2012 Tokyo Conferences on Afghanistan as well as the 2012 NATO Summit revealed that major Western powers will remain engaged in Afghanistan even after the majority of the troops have been ordered back home. The continuing aim of the international efforts is to increase Afghan security capabilities, to keep terrorism and other regional threats at bay, and to contribute to political stability as well as sustainable development. During the transition period and thereafter, the international community will, however, have to prove that it continues to be a committed partner to the Afghans.

Afghanistan’s Importance for Regional Stability

Although technically on the margins of the Middle East, Afghanistan has always been an important factor in the political dynamics between its geographical neighbors and the West. Especially since the beginning of the international military engagement in 2001, the developments in the country have revealed their regional and global security dimensions. On the one hand, the neighboring states have been affected by flows of refugees, spreading violence, drug trafficking, and the consequences of military deployment. On the other hand, Afghanistan could increase its importance concerning the prevention and countering of terrorism as well as its weight in the political conflict between the two major players, namely the United States and Iran, over power and influence in the region. Furthermore, the interests of neighboring countries, amongst them especially China and India, in security, development, and economic matters add to the diplomatic complexity.

Creating and sustaining regional stability through a stabilized Afghanistan after 2014 will thus be influential to the envisaged proceedings of the Middle East Conference (MEC) on a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DVs). Afghanistan is not part of the mandate of the Helsinki gathering, envisaged by the international community in 2010. Nonetheless, the transitioning process will be important for the region as a whole as it involves major players – especially the U.S. and Iran – and should thus be closely monitored in view of the planned MEC.

Against this backdrop, this Policy Brief seeks to explore possibilities for the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States to become reliable partners of Afghanistan. The 2013 elections in Iran, bringing President Hassan Rouhani to power, may provide not only for improvement on the nuclear conflict with the U.S. but also for further policy changes. This issue considers the potential for regional cooperation on Afghanistan, identifying common interests and the possibilities for joint engagement.
Concerns and Challenges in the Context of the Transition

The international engagement in Afghanistan is a unique example in history: more than 50 nations have been involved either militarily or by providing humanitarian aid. As foreign troops will leave the country, the ongoing transition raises concerns and poses challenges including security, political stability, democratization and rule of law, economic sustainability as well as regional and international integration.

The Security Situation

The challenges for peace and stability in a country ravaged by more than three decades of war are of course considerable. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) continue to develop into a force capable of taking the lead for security responsibility throughout the country. Yet, efforts to guarantee stability are undermined by the Taliban-led insurgency and Al-Qaeda affiliates. The Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) have made significant progress, displaying growing operational effectiveness. The ANA, starting at zero a decade ago, now numbers about 200,000 soldiers which adds to about 149,000 active members of the ANP. As of July 2013, the entire country has been under ANA control with ISAF mostly providing training and support.1 Nonetheless, the ANSF are confronted with various challenges, including attrition, leadership deficits, and limited capabilities in staff planning, management, logistics, and procurement. Though polls show that the security forces continue to rise in public esteem, “corruption and the influence of criminal patronage networks remain a concern that could jeopardize the legitimacy of the ANSF and pose a threat to the transition process.”2 Facing both security transition and upcoming presidential elections in April 2014, the security forces are passing through a sensitive phase. Therefore, Afghanistan and the U.S. have recently been negotiating the security measures after 2014: in November 2013 the Loya Jirga assembled to consult over the Security Pact and recommended it for signature to President Karzai.3

Political Stability, Elections, and Democratic Legitimacy

While the focus of the transition has so far been on security matters, the improvement of the electoral process for a constitutional transfer of power in April 2014 has mostly been neglected. In this regard, the perception of challenges differs between Afghans and their Western partners and even the current President Hamid Karzai has become subject to controversy.4 On the one hand, he is still considered an important partner of the international community; although, his criticism of the United States caused some diplomatic resentment. On the other hand, Afghan opposition parties and civil society organizations associate him with autocracy and militarization. President Karzai has also been accused of tribalism, personalized politics, and corruption.

As the transition coincides with presidential elections, opposition groups fear that Karzai and his followers will use this opportunity to maintain their key power positions. Many political parties have experienced restrictions in their campaigning. This development has resulted in concerns about repeated election fraud and further limitations on civil and human rights. The fear prevails that the government’s legitimacy will further suffer, undermining the weak democratic structures.

Furthermore, the withdrawal of international forces highlights the relevance of the ‘Taliban question’ for domestic politics. The political landscape has been divided on the question of whether this group should be included in the post-2014 political system or rather excluded and combated instead. As President Karzai failed to consult with the Afghan Parliament, political opposition, and civil society representatives; his peace efforts have not enjoyed broad support. Both, the 2010 ‘Consultative Peace Jirga’ and the 2011 ‘Traditional Loya Jirga’, upon which he has built the so-called ‘High Peace Council’, have been criticized as unconstitutional.5 Thus, the ‘Taliban question’ will continue to be one of the most pressing domestic policy issues, especially as rumors on negotiations between the Taliban and the United States recur.

Economic Development

Concerning the economic development, Afghanistan has yet a long way ahead
of itself. Over the past eleven years the growth of the gross domestic product of up to $20 billion mainly consisted of war expenses, foreign aid, and illicit drugs. This economic ‘bubble’ is likely to burst beyond 2014. Moreover, the international community’s pledge of $8.1 billion per year allocated to security and development is tied to conditions for the first time. The international donors ensure a steady stream of financing in exchange for stronger anti-corruption measures and the establishment of the rule of law.6

However, with a rate of 11 percent of economic growth in 2012, Afghanistan is one of the fastest growing economies worldwide. Stabilizing and safeguarding these gains can facilitate the pacification of the conflict-ridden country. Thus, it will be vital to support Afghanistan’s integration into regional and global exchange systems. Thereby, many Afghans hope to overcome the prevalent state of underdevelopment which is understood as one of the root causes of violence. Since Afghanistan’s economic progress is a long-term project, joint ventures with regional and global partners will require continuous commitment beyond 2014.

Regional and International Geopolitics

The transition process also impacts Afghanistan’s foreign relations as well as regional and international politics. After the withdrawal of foreign troops, shifts in influence may be witnessed. The geopolitical, strategic, and economic interests of Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia as well as other relevant regional actors apart from the U.S. and European countries are often overlapping and, at times, competing. Especially the role of Pakistan has been ambivalent. On the one hand, Islamabad is viewed as a strategic partner in an effort to stabilize Afghanistan and the region beyond 2014. On the other hand, the country is accused of destabilizing Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban and terrorist networks.7 Russia and China – Beijing has upgraded its relations with Kabul to a strategic partnership – are largely seen as protecting their own strategic interests in the region. They have collectively strengthened the Shanghai Cooperation Organization8 against regional drug-trafficking, extremism, terrorism, political instability, and corruption. Iran and Saudi Arabia are considered countries

Kayhan Barzegar is the Director of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies (IMESS) and a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Strategic Research (CSR) in Tehran. He also holds the Chair of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the Islamic Azad University. During 2007-2011, he was a Research Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Since 2010, he has been a Research Associate at the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dr. Barzegar is the Editor-in-Chief of Discourse: An Iranian English Quarterly.

Cornelius Friesendorf is a Lecturer at Goethe University, Frankfurt and a Research Fellow at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF). His work focuses on non-state armed groups, military-police relations, and security sector reform. He holds degrees from the University of Zurich, the Free University Berlin, and the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has conducted fieldwork in South America, North Africa, the Balkans, Central Asia, and Afghanistan and held positions at the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces and at the Geneva School of Diplomacy & International Relations.

Peter Jones is an Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa. He held various positions related to international affairs and security at the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Privy Council Office, and the Department of Defense. Furthermore, Prof. Jones led the Middle East Security and Arms Control Project at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in Sweden in the 1990s. He holds a PhD in War Studies from King’s College, London, and an MA in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada.

Dorte Hühnert is a Research Assistant at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) and on the staff of the Academic Peace Orchestra Middle East as a co-editor of the POLICY BRIEF series. She holds a BA in Politics and Economics from the University of Münster and has studied at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Rennes, France. Currently, she is enrolled in the master program International Studies/Peace and Conflict Studies at Goethe University, Frankfurt.

Dalia Dassa Kaye is the Director of the Center for Middle East Public Policy at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, CA. In 2011-2012 she was a Visiting Professor at UCLA’s International Institute and Burkle Center. Before joining RAND, Dr. Kaye served as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow at the Dutch Foreign Ministry. From 1998 to 2003, she was an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley, CA.

Thomas Kieschnick is holds an MA in Peace and Conflict Studies from Philipps-University of Marburg, and a BA in political science and Arab language from the University of Leipzig, Germany. In summer 2011, he was an intern at the German Heinrich-Boell-Foundation in Kabul, Afghanistan. Mr. Kieschnick has also been a Junior Researcher in the Portuguese-German research project ‘Policies of Intervention – A Comparison of German and Portuguese Foreign Policy Engagements in South Asia’ since 2011.
Past Engagement in Afghanistan: The Complex U.S.-Iranian Relationship

Iran and the United States are two major players with ample common geopolitical interests in establishing stability in Afghanistan. Iran took an active interest in Afghanistan following the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. Since the overthrow of the Taliban was in Iran’s interest, Tehran has pursued a policy of cooperation with Washington; even though, the presence of American forces across Iran’s eastern border was seen as a national security challenge. This cooperative approach was also vividly documented in the constructive role Iran played in the first Bonn Conference in December 2001.

However, when the George W. Bush administration branded Iran as part of the ‘axis of evil’ in early 2002, the continuation of cooperation between Tehran and Washington on Afghanistan stymied. Continuing to date the U.S. policy has rather focused on minimizing and in part discrediting Iran’s role in terms of security and economic development in Afghanistan. As a result, the two countries have followed differing strategies to establish stability, to counter terrorism and to fight drug smuggling – interests they actually share. How this might change in view of the recent Iranian elections and the accompanied improvements on the nuclear issue remains yet to be seen.

The U.S. Strategic Developments in Afghanistan

The military intervention in Afghanistan is closely connected to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 after which the George W. Bush administration declared regional multilateral conferences on Afghanistan. To name a few: Iran has been pushing for a two-track dialogue, involving Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan and Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan. India and the U.S. have held two rounds of trilateral consultations with the country. Similarly, the U.S., Afghanistan, and Pakistan have held several trilateral meetings. The two Western-backed regional processes, namely the Afghan-led Istanbul Process and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conferences on Afghanistan, are expected to unify diverging approaches on security and economics.

Box No. 1: From an Afghan Point of View

The international engagement in Afghanistan since 2001 has repeatedly been evaluated by the international actors as well as the Afghans. Especially, actors from Afghan civil society and politics are currently assessing the post-Taliban era, the stage of responsibilities to be transferred, and future perspectives.

Although no single and coherent ‘Afghan opinion’ exists as to how to assess the international engagement, many criticize that from the beginning multiple voices have been marginalized and excluded from the negotiations on Afghanistan’s future. The U.S. military approach to eradicate the Taliban and Al-Qaeda entailed the negligence of state-building measures after the intervention. Today’s grievances are still ascribed to lacking civilian development. In this regard, the Taliban’s influence and the role of neighboring countries and regional players, such as Pakistan and Iran, remain important political issues.

Additionally, the international engagement often took the form of proxy politics placing their stakeholders in the Kabul administration. Such actions often led to contradictory policies by the Afghan state that were not in the interest of its people but created structural dependencies on external donors and caused the government a lack of internal legitimacy. In this context, the Western ambition of installing democratic structures was seen to be replaced by the more moderate aim of stabilizing the country.

The integration into regional cooperative frameworks would benefit Afghanistan and also lead to the overcoming of resentment between regional and global antagonists. In this context, a stronger cooperation with Iran has been welcomed, as Tehran has recently been playing an important role in Afghanistan’s economic development. The same applies to the United States which has become Afghanistan’s most important partner as the biggest bilateral donor for development projects and military aid since 2001.

Additionally, several countries have either hosted or taken part in various

the war on terror. In October 2001 the U.S. launched the military offensive ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ after the Taliban regime had refused to give up Al-Qaeda leaders suspected of having planned the attacks. The airstrikes were backed by troops of the Northern Alliance and U.S. Special Forces on the ground. Within two months the Taliban regime was toppled and the Bonn Conference was held in order to establish a new government and start the rebuilding and development process.

Thereafter, two military strategies and missions were in place: the American-led ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ to counter terrorism in the region and the UN-mandated ISAF mission to stabilize Afghanistan during its rebuilding. In 2002, Provincial Reconstruction Teams under NATO leadership were employed throughout Afghanistan to assist the security stabilizing process and help develop rural areas. In the first years after the regime change, considerable progress was made in terms of political and economic development. However, when the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, the void left by the massive transfer of American military is today seen as the major mistake that led in consequence to a deterioration of the security situation in the following years.

When President Barack Obama came into office in 2009, he was facing a serious dilemma in Afghanistan. On the one hand, the American public withdrew its support for the military mission due to the ever increasing number of soldiers killed in action. Furthermore, support of the international partners in Afghanistan was rapidly decreasing. On the other, an uncoordinated withdrawal that would leave an instable country prone to the growing influence of extremists and terrorists with unforeseeable consequences for regional and global security could not be risked.

Therefore, the U.S. focus changed to counterinsurgency within the newly formulated ‘Af-Pak’ strategy. Although these measures meant a short-term increase in forces and financial support, it was seen as the only possibility to slowly transfer responsibility to the Afghan authorities. With Afghan ownership as the strategic focus, the phased withdrawal of American and international forces was simultaneously prepared. The Obama administration’s approach included the adjacent countries and regional players, especially Pakistan, but also India and China for political and economic cooperation in stabilizing and helping develop Afghanistan. Iran was also identified as an important actor in this respect. Although U.S.-Iranian cooperation would certainly help the Afghans, the bilateral relations
Box No. 2: The Swiss Memorandum of May 2003

“Steps:
I. communication of mutual agreement on the following procedure

II. mutual simultaneous statements “We have always been ready for direct and authorita-
itive talks with the US/with Iran with the aim of discussing – in mutual respect – our com-
mon interests and our mutual concerns, but we have always made it clear that such talks can only be held, if genuine progress for a solution of our own concerns can be achieved.”

III. a first direct meeting on the appropriate level (for instance in Paris) will be held with
the previously agreed aims

a. of a decision on the first mutual steps
   • Iraq: establishment of a common working group on Iraq, active Iranian support
     for Iraqi stabilization, US-commitment to take Iranian reparation claims into the
discussion on Iraq foreign depts.
   • Terrorism: US-commitment to disarm and remove MKO from Iraq and take
     action in accordance with SCR1373 against its leadership, Iranian commitment
for enhanced action against Al Qaida members in Iran, agreement on coopera-
tion and information exchange
   • Iranian general statement “to support a peaceful solution in the Middle East
     involving the parties concerned”
   • US general statement that “Iran did not belong to the ‘axis of evil’”
   • US-acceptance to halt its impediments against Iran in international financial and
     trade institutions

b. of the establishment of three parallel working groups on disarmament, regional
security and economic cooperation. Their aim is an agreement on three parallel
road maps, for the discussions of these working groups each side accepts that the
other side’s aims (see above) are put on the agenda:

1) Disarmament: road map, which combines the mutual aims of, on the one side,
   full transparency by international commitments and guarantees to abstain from
   WMD with, on the other side, full access to western technology (in the three
   areas),

2) Terrorism and regional security: road map for the above mentioned aims on
   Middle East and terrorism

3) Economic cooperation: road map for the abolishment of the sanctions,
   rescinding of judgments, and un-freezing of assets

c. of agreement on a time-table for implementation

d. and of a public statement after this first meeting on the achieved agree-
ments.”


For further information on the ambivalent role Iran has played in offering at times measured support for the Taliban in order to counter U.S. influence in Afghanistan see: Alireza Nader and Joya Laha (2011) Iran’s Balancing Act in Afghanistan, Occasional Paper, Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

between Washington and Tehran are still dominated by the unresolved conflict
over Iran’s nuclear program. Although this may change considering the recent
progress made by the U.S. and Iran on economic sanctions and the nuclear issue,
Washington’s broader regional strategy up to this point has been focusing on
countering Iran. This emphasis, however, will have to turn to political goals as
the drawdown of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan proceeds, leaving very little
residual forces. Since both Washington and Tehran have long-term interests
in governmental stability as well as
development progress in Afghanistan, these issues can be considered common
ground for potential cooperation.

For the 2014 transition U.S. efforts will have to increasingly focus on political
factors. Debates about residual forces necessary to continue counterterrorism
operations and support the ANSF in providing national security are likely to
dominate discussions of U.S.-Afghan policy. However, arguments are growing
that the most pressing concerns for Afghanistan’s future will center on
political transition rather than military security. Unfortunately, governance and
development issues have not yet received adequate attention. Between 2001 and
2013 the United States has provided almost $93 billion to Afghanistan, of
which two thirds went to the national police and army training. The remainder
of the funds was invested in large-scale development and infrastructure projects.
Completing these efforts in the security area, a political strategy will be
essential for a successful transition. Such
an approach would have to include efforts
to bolster a legitimate Afghan central
government, with a smooth 2014 presi-
dential election, and a political settlement
involving all Afghan actors – the Taliban
as well.

Notably, Iran does not factor into official
American regional strategy, underscoring
the common view in Washington that
sees Tehran as a challenge to U.S. policy
in Afghanistan and not as a helpful actor
regarding shared concerns. Despite many
areas of divergence, American and Iranian
interests may overlap to a greater degree
in Afghanistan than anywhere else. Yet,
given the nature of U.S.-Iranian relations,
capitalizing on such shared concerns will
prove difficult in the short-run but may
seem hopeful in the long-run.

Iran’s Engagement and Cooperative
Efforts in Afghanistan

Notwithstanding its rhetoric against the
Islamic Republic, since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 every U.S. adminis-
tration has sought cooperation through
diplomatic engagement on important
issues. Despite criticism and Washington’s
official refusal to partner with Iran in
Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic was
largely involved in 2001: Tehran provided
contacts and influence with a network
of 15,000 soldiers of the anti-Taliban
Northern Alliance which it had helped to unify, fund, and train. It also assisted by offering intelligence information and ties to a wide range of Afghan political figures. ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ was conducted on the ground by the Northern Alliance – largely encouraged by Tehran to work with U.S. military commanders – backed by American airpower, and supported by U.S. Special Forces and CIA paramilitary officers.  

Furthermore, Iran provided robust and essential assistance to Washington’s efforts to build a post-Taliban political order, also at the 2001 Bonn Conference. Tehran was encouraging its Afghan allies to endorse the Afghan Interim Authority, overrode their objections to the naming of Pashtun Hamid Karzai as President, and helped sideline apprehended spoilers. Following the Bonn Conference, the United States and Iran launched an ongoing channel of regular meetings to coordinate efforts on Afghanistan and related issues lasting for 17 months. Throughout this period, Iranian officials proved helpful in bolstering the Karzai government and blocking Al-Qaeda and Taliban personnel trying to flee Afghanistan to or through Iran. 

 Nonetheless, Tehran’s engagement with Washington in Afghanistan came to a halt for several reasons. Overall, views persisted in the George W. Bush administration that the Islamic Republic would oppose any American military presence in the region. Furthermore, after 9/11, hardliners in the Bush administration believed that the United States had to demonstrate its status as the world’s only and uncontested superpower. The bilateral channel came to an impasse after the Iraq invasion in March 2003. To solve bilateral conflicts, Tehran sent a non-paper to the U.S. administration through Switzerland, America’s protecting power in Iran, in early May 2003 (see Box No. 2). The memo was authored by Iran’s ambassador to France, Sadegh Kharrazi, with help from Swiss ambassador to Iran, Tim Guldimann, and Mohammad Javad Zarif, former Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister and now Foreign Minister in the Rouhani government. In this paper, the Iranian leadership offered full cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, to end its support for Palestinian groups, its help in stabilizing Iraq and combating Al-Qaeda, and finally to accept a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the Bush administration rejected the proposal and cut off the bilateral channel hardly two weeks later. 

Since 2003, prospects of renewing U.S.-Iranian cooperation over Afghanistan have been further strained as a result of different approaches to post-conflict stabilization. From Tehran’s perspective a constructive American approach would have involved a coordinated effort at political reconstruction based on power sharing among Iran’s Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara allies and non-Taliban Pashtuns, followed by the speedy withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign troops. Iranian policy makers were concerned that, instead, Washington wanted a longer-term option to use Afghan bases – especially in Herat on Iran’s eastern border – to project military power into other parts of the region. The 2005 U.S.-Afghan Declaration for Strategic Partnership, which clarified that American military forces would not be leaving in the foreseeable future, confirmed Iranian fears.  

Besides perceiving the U.S. forces in Afghanistan as a direct threat to Tehran’s interests, Iranian officials anticipated that Afghans would understand a prolonged American military presence as occupation. This judgment was based on events, as greater geographic penetration by American forces since 2006 and the deployment of additional U.S. troops since 2009 directly correlated with escalating violence. Indeed, this instability facilitated the Taliban comeback, forcing Karzai and Washington to negotiate with them, largely on the Taliban’s terms. Therefore, Iranian policy makers questioned U.S. intentions in Afghanistan. Further, they were dismayed that the Obama administration never developed a strategy for a political settlement. Moreover, at this point, any settlement had to include the Taliban – a worrying prospect for Iran. Yet, Tehran continues to advocate a genuinely regional approach to post-conflict stabilization, emphasizing that no lasting solution is possible without its involvement. 

Even without Washington’s official consent, Iran has been actively responding to the practical need to stabilize Afghanistan’s border provinces. Since both countries share a 946 km border, Iran is a natural partner for stability in these areas. Tehran’s role is even more
enhanced by the fact that the west and north of Afghanistan also share the Persian culture. Economically, however, the areas on both sides of the border are underdeveloped due to a lack of natural resources (mainly farm land and water), limited precipitation, illiteracy, unskilled rural population, and a lack of investment.

Furthermore, a stabilization of Afghanistan’s border provinces is important to Tehran because of two additional challenges: refugee flows and drug trafficking. Iran has been highly affected by refugee flows from Afghanistan. Currently an estimated three million Afghani refugees live in Iran; about 850,000 are registered and 450,000 have a work visa, the remaining are considered illegal. Tehran has been active in border control with regard to drug trafficking because an estimated three million Iranians, mostly young people, have become addicted to narcotic substances produced in Afghanistan. Officially about 3,720 Iranian border police have been killed on duty by drug smugglers.23 However, the Iranian border control efforts bear fruit: the security in the corresponding Afghan provinces has significantly improved. Iran’s interest in a stable Afghanistan also shows in Tehran’s activities to invest in infrastructure projects such as dams and railroads as well as in economic support fostering trade agreements and planning free trade zones.

As American forces partially withdraw from Afghanistan, policy makers have become acutely aware that regional actors will play a crucial role for a successful post-2014 transition. In the U.S. view, a number of spoilers could undermine Afghan security and stability. While Pakistan is undoubtedly the most critical neighbor in this respect, Iran’s role in Afghanistan can no longer be neglected. As one of the core U.S. regional interests, creating stability in Afghanistan could be considered the ‘simplest’ way for cooperation and a starting point for de-escalating bilateral relations with Iran. However, this will not translate easily into practical politics.

Since 2003, U.S. strategic attention has shifted to Pakistan. This decision and long-standing tensions that have had a negative impact on Iran-Afghanistan relations have decreased the potential for cooperation. Western economic sanctions over Tehran’s nuclear program along with the current Syrian crisis, have led the Iranian government to a more confrontational stance on the presence of coalition forces in Afghanistan. How this
may change with Rouhani as President and the forthcoming changes in foreign policy remains to be seen. Also, the relationship between NATO and Iran has been characterized by accusations and a lack of acknowledgement of common interests.

However, a major part of Washington’s policy community views Iran as a regional strategic competitor and spoiler, undermining American influence and ousting U.S. presence in the region. This perspective further complicates cooperation with Iran on possibly shared interests and mutual concerns in Afghanistan. Any U.S.-Iranian cooperation, even if tactical, could contribute to both stability and development in Afghanistan and potentially de-escalate tensions in U.S.-Iranian relations. Despite such possible benefits, broader issues – mainly the nuclear dispute – may, to date, prevent such cooperative postures.

**Dealing with the Taliban**

Concerning the political inclusion of the Taliban Iran and the U.S. share the mutual interest in containing the Taliban in any future Afghan government. While Iran would not oppose an involvement of the Taliban under the central government’s control, the U.S. and NATO members as well as the Afghan government have made first steps towards reconciliation with the Taliban to include them into the political process. However, cooperation between Iran and the U.S. in Afghanistan seems to be the best way for dealing with a re-politicizing of the Taliban through the involvement of all major regional players in this process. It can also play an important role in building trust between Iran and the U.S. regarding the nuclear talks. Indeed, in its past suggested packages, Tehran has proposed its close cooperation with the West in solving Afghanistan’s crisis. Especially the border regions to Pakistan are of mutual concern because they provide safe haven for Taliban fighters. In Obama’s ‘Af-Pak’ strategy, this tribal belt has been rated as the most dangerous border in the world. Thus, these areas remain one of the security threats and challenges for the U.S. and Iran.

Yet, the perceptions of the other’s commitment to this goal differ widely. Iran wonders how NATO, after many years of fighting and sacrifice, can be about to abandon the Afghan government to its fate. In contrast, NATO nations, and especially the U.S., claim to have evidence that Iran has supported elements of the Taliban with weapons and other means, questioning Tehran’s claims of non-interference in Afghan affairs. These accusations complicate joint activities on overlapping interests.

**Containment Strategies**

Given the current conflicting relations, close cooperation between Washington and Tehran in the near future seemed unrealistic for a long time. However, the influence of Rouhani in power may offer hope for improved ties and, thus, prospects for renewed U.S.-Iranian cooperation over Afghanistan. So far, however, the American strategy has been based on introducing Iran as the main source of threat for the region’s security. Under such circumstances, Iran is highly unlikely to offer its full cooperation capacity in solving American problems in Afghanistan and in the region at large. To preserve national security interests, especially on the nuclear standoff, Iran has been following its own containment strategy in Afghanistan.

Hence, various issues dividing Iran and the United States affect their ability to engage constructively on Afghanistan. How the United States can promote expanding Afghan trade with its neighbors (which inevitably would include Iran), while simultaneously supporting policies designed to economically isolate Iran, is difficult to imagine. Mutual allegations of the actors to steer policies in order to manipulate the other pose barriers for practical cooperation in this regard. This situation will, however, change to some extent after 2014, as the withdrawal of foreign forces will remove Iran’s sense of a direct U.S. threat. Thus, the transition could provide the grounds for backing the equations of power and politics in Afghanistan in which Iran can play its appropriate role.

**Bargaining on Common Ground**

Others tend to believe that the cooperation between Iran and the U.S. in resolving the Afghan crisis can occur in the context of a ‘grand bargain’ between the two countries. Though Afghanistan’s situation plays a significant role in the U.S.-Iran relations, an arrangement...
between both countries evolving around a regional issue like Afghanistan’s crisis is rather unlikely. The aims and expectations of the two sides in this respect mainly strive for increasing their regional role, hence are in conflict with one another. These issues can only act as a trigger to initiate strategic talks.

In order to take advantage of overlapping interests, the United States will need to drop its goal of limiting Iranian influence in Afghanistan and accept an Iranian role in the Afghan transition process. Whether Tehran is willing to coordinate with Washington on reconstruction efforts (through multilateral forums, at least initially) remains an open question. The possibility may be more likely if Russia and India, which both share American and Iranian interests in thwarting the return of the Taliban rule, are part of the equation. It seems rather unlikely that Tehran would support Afghanistan if it chooses a long-term security partnership with the United States. If the Americans and Iran want to see a stable central Afghan authority capable of controlling its borders that has reconciled with more moderate Taliban groups within the country, both actors will need to accept a role for the other in Afghanistan’s future.

With regard to possibilities of U.S.-Iranian cooperation over Afghanistan two scenarios would be conceivable. The first option would be that Iran and the United States cooperate on the transition process induced and led by Afghan diplomats. The second option would be for the two countries to both participate in a broader, multilateral setting on the topic of the upcoming transition. This option of tacit cooperation implies that the international community will continue their efforts to support the stabilizing process in Afghanistan open to all participants willing to contribute. In such a broad international setting, the U.S. and Iran could both take part, without explicitly labeling their cooperation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall this Policy Brief was led by the thought that the envisaged 2014 transition in Afghanistan could bring about cooperation potential for the U.S. and Iran in order to create and gradually increase stability in the region. While this assumption has to be challenged by the numerous difficulties currently shaping the relations between Washington and Tehran, the potential cooperation fields laid out in this Policy Brief also provide limited hope.

After the transition, the domestic developments will largely be shaped by Afghan political elites. Nevertheless, strategies will need to be developed to encourage persistent outside assistance. Thereby, the strong nexus between security, political, and economic factors should be kept in mind. The exit of ISAF forces has to be conducted responsibly and in an effort to overcome budgetary, equipment, and training needs of the Afghan National Security Forces. Strengthening the rule of law and improving the electoral process will be vital for a successful constitutional power transfer in April 2014. Government, parliament, opposition, and civil society ought to be unified on the peace process to guarantee domestic stability. A comprehensive economic plan will be essential to support such a sustainable development. Complementary, an inclusive dialogue aiming at Taliban participation in the 2014 and 2015 elections should be initiated.

One means to accomplish economic and political development in Afghanistan could be through cooperation amongst regional countries. This should also include Iran and the West – which, in principle, share mutual goals. Certainly, differences prevail over specific issues, but each side has a broadly shared interest in helping Afghanistan manage the transition.«
also include Afghan’s political actors in order to boost legitimacy.

Outlook: Short-term, Intermediate, and Long-term Steps

In this regard, relations between Tehran and Washington are particularly important. Trust must be built through regular and sustained talks to develop a basis for informal policy coordination. In essence, two scenarios could be envisaged:

- Iran and the United States cooperate through Afghan diplomats on the transition. This requires Afghan diplomats to induce and lead the process facilitating U.S.-Iranian cooperation to the benefit of the stabilizing process.
- Both countries participate on the upcoming transition in a multilateral setting. This cooperation – though it might only be tacit – would imply for the international community to continue the stabilizing support for

Endnotes

1. ‘Karzai announces Afghan security handover’, Agence France-Presse, June 18, 2013.
26. For further information on the ambivalent role Iran has played in offering at times measured support for the Taliban in order to counter U.S. influence in Afghanistan see: Alireza Nader and Joya Laha (2011) Iran’s Balancing Act in Afghanistan, Occasional Paper, Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
Afghanistan in a process open willing contributors. Thus, both, the U.S. and Iran, could participate without explicitly labeling their cooperation.

As an intermediate step, Track II initiatives could help explore cooperation potentials concerning the relations between Iran, Afghanistan, and the United States. Various groups are already dealing with the relations of the U.S., Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and neighboring countries. However, Iran's role has generally been neglected, as have opportunities for talks between Iran and possible regional allies. Furthermore, the European countries have been making progress as mediators and providing development aid. They should continue to seize their role to initiate talks between the U.S. and Iran. Cooperative projects and a successful transition in Afghanistan play a key role for domestic and regional stability.

The more U.S.-Iranian tensions de-escalate, the more likely it is that the two countries can engage in cooperation in Afghanistan. With the United States likely to focus on Afghan political and development issues after 2014, the prospects for at least limited U.S.-Iranian engagement may improve. However, without major progress on the nuclear negotiations associated with a subsequent shift in the overall American approach to Iran in regional affairs, progress on even 'easy' areas of mutual concern in Afghanistan is not very likely. Therefore, the current developments are promising. If the broader context of U.S.-Iranian relations allows for some positive coordination on Afghanistan, the U.S. position on Iran's role will need to shift from a threat-based framework towards one focused on opportunities.

Coming to terms over Afghanistan, two important actors in the process to a Helsinki gathering – Iran and the United States – would prove that common interests may result in regional cooperation and joint engagement. In any case, future developments in Afghanistan as well as the role Iran and the U.S. will play in it will certainly have an impact on the entire region. Therefore, the future of Afghanistan could become important for the Middle East Conference and should be kept in mind during discussions on a WMD/DVs Free Zone in the Middle East.