



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

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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 potential for joint engagement.

Abstract

Afghanistan has been and will continue to be a key factor for the adjacent regional security architecture of the Middle East due to its geostrategic location. During the upcoming transition period until 2014 and thereafter, the international community will have to prove its continued commitment as a partner to the Afghan government and people. 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. Therefore, the transition should be closely followed, as a stable Afghanistan will also be beneficial for the entire region and its international strategic partners.

Against this backdrop, this POLICY BRIEF seeks to explore possibilities for Iran and the U.S. as two key players in the region to become salient investors and partners to Afghanistan in addressing security issues, the refugee problem, and underdevelopment as well as combating terrorism. Therefore, this issue considers the potential for regional cooperation on Afghanistan, identifying common interests and the possibilities for joint engagement. ■

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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

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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



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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.¹

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.

i. Ahmed Rashid (2008) *Decent into Chaos: Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Threat to Global Security*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 171-264.

with stronger involvement in the developments and the upcoming transition. Tehran is currently working on reaching a strategic partnership with Afghanistan as well.⁹

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

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 Process¹⁰ and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conferences¹¹ on Afghanistan, are expected to unify diverging approaches on security and economics.

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 2001.¹² 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.¹³ 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



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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

When President Barack Obama came into office in 2009, he was facing a serious dilemma in Afghanistan.¹⁸ 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



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Ahmad Wali Masoud is the head of the Massoud Foundation, Afghanistan, as the younger brother of Ahmad Shah Massoud. Masoud has been the Ambassador of Afghanistan to the UK; Special Representative of Ahmad Shah Massoud in Europe, and a delegate to the Bonn Conference in 2001. Furthermore, he is the founder of Nahzat-e-Mili Afghanistan, a political party, which played a key role in the Emergency Loya Jirga in 2002. He holds a degree in Diplomatic Studies from Westminster University London.



Mahmoud Saikal served as Afghanistan's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2005-2006. He was also Ambassador to Australia and New Zealand (2002-2005), Honorary Consul for Afghanistan in Australia (1994-2002), and Minister Counselor and First Secretary at the Afghan Embassy in Tokyo (1993-1994). He heads a regional Track II project involving Afghanistan and its neighbors and has been Senior Advisor to the Afghanistan National Development Strategy as well as to the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank. Mr. Saikal is a graduate of both the University of Sydney and the University of Canberra.



Amrullah Saleh is an Afghan politician who served as the Director of the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's intelligence service, from 2004-2010. In 1997, he was appointed by anti-Taliban leader Ahmad Shah Massoud to lead the United Front's (Northern Alliance) liaison office inside the Afghan Embassy in Dushanbe handling contacts to international non-governmental (humanitarian) organizations and intelligence agencies. In late 2010, Mr. Saleh created one of the strongest Afghan pro-democracy and anti-Taliban movements, the Basej-e Milli (National Movement) or Afghanistan Green Trend.

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 authoritative talks with the US/with Iran with the aim of discussing – in mutual respect – our common 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 debts.
 - **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 cooperation 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 agreements.”**

Source: The full text of the Swiss Iran memorandum is online available at http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/opinion/20070429_iran-memo-expurgated.pdf (August 24, 2013)

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.

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.¹⁹ The remainder of the funds was invested in large-scale development and infrastructure projects. Complementing 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 presidential 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. administration 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

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



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.²⁰

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 Guldemann, 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.²¹

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 Partnership²², 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

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Box No. 3: Iran and the Taliban

Iran has always considered the Taliban's extremist thinking a threat to its ideology and national interests, mainly for two reasons. From an ideological perspective the Taliban are perceived anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite; in terms of security, they are viewed as exclusivist and extremism-spreading. Therefore, Tehran never officially recognized the Taliban during their reign (1996-2001) and their assault of the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 further deteriorated their relations. Despite the U.S.-Iranian rivalry, Tehran helped removing the Taliban regime in 2001.ⁱ



Source: UN Photo/Eric Kanenstein

Nonetheless, to preserve stability, Iran is likely to accept a managed Taliban involvement. According to Tehran, Afghan political stability and the prevention of extremists trends depends on ethnic and identical plurality in power sharing. As the foundations of the relations with the Taliban are based on ideological differences rather than regional power politics, Tehran favors to contain the participation of the group. Through this approach Iran hopes to include the Taliban as constructive actors instead of supporting them as spoilers in the transition process.

Though such a scenario would not be threatening, Tehran is not likely to hold direct negotiations with the Taliban due to their bitter history. Yet, Iranians might welcome indirect talks through (trans-)regional players, like Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and even the U.S. or EU countries. However, Iran fears a strong Taliban position in the Afghan government may lead to conflicts of interests and tension, subsequently spreading extremism which can undermine Iran's regional status, allowing for more influence of rivals such as Pakistan and partially Saudi Arabia in Afghan politics.

i. 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.

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 Afghan 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.

The United States and Iran: Issues of Controversy and Potential for Cooperation

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

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.



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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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

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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. By working together Washington and Tehran can increase the likelihood of an Afghan success story. Working in contradiction to each other only strengthens forces opposed to peace and stability in Afghanistan, as it provides them with the ability to play external actors off against one another.

So far such cooperation between Western countries and Iran seemed unlikely. However, if an inclusive approach to post-2014 Afghanistan could be developed, along with a regional process and further development on the Iranian nuclear conflict, this might create a multilateral forum within which some cooperation could play out. What is being proposed here is that future attempts by the West and Iran to support Afghanistan should be focused on much more concrete (even if largely tacit) cooperation. These efforts should

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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

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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. ■

About the ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST (APOME)

The ORCHESTRA is the follow-up project of the "Multilateral Study Group on the Establishment of a Missile Free Zone in the Middle East". The ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST is a classical Track II initiative: it consists of some 100 experts – mainly from the Middle East/Gulf, one of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world. The ORCHESTRA is meeting regularly in working groups (CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS) on specific topics in the context of a workshop cycle from 2011-2014. The main goal of this initiative is to shape the prospective Middle East Conference on the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles agreed upon by the international community in May 2010.

For this reason, these experts develop ideas, concepts, and background information in a series of POLICY BRIEFS which are the results of intense discussions within the CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS. In this framework, the broader normative Cooperative Security Concept will be further developed, embedded, and institutionalized in the region. At the same time, the ORCHESTRA meetings serve as venues for confidence building among the experts. The networking activities of PRIF's Project Group are documented by the ATLAS on Track II research activities in or about the Middle East/Gulf region.

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