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E-mail: fesmos@dol.ru



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# "The Engagement of Regional Neighbors: a Precondition for Sustainable Development in Afghanistan"

*Ivan Safranchuk,  
Ambassador Akbarsho Iskandarov*

*About the authors: Dr. Ivan Safranchuk is associate professor, Moscow State Institute of International relations; publisher, "Great Game: politics, business, security in Central Asia". Through 2010 he led the project, sponsored by Russian MFA, to research regional perspectives on the Afghani situation. Within this project bilateral workshops of Russian and local experts to discuss Afghani issues were organized in Kabul, Mazari-Sharif, Delhi, Beijing, Islamabad. In 2011 Dr. Safranchuk coordinates the project "Strengthening economic ties between Afghanistan and neighboring countries", implemented through ESCAP on the Russian donation.*

*Akbarsho Iskandarov served as Ambassador of Tajikistan to Turkmenistan and to Kazakhstan. At the present time Amb. Iskandarov is a National Coordinator of Tajikistan for SCO as well as a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic Studies (under the President of Tajikistan), but most of the time spends in Moscow and contributes to the work of Russian research and political structures on Central Asian and Afghan issues.*

### **Beyond ISAF – regional engagement**

Since the Taliban's military defeat and loss of power in 2001, the international coalition has failed to achieve further noticeable success in Afghanistan. Economic conditions have remained poor, compounded by the lack of security and stability, while at the same time the production and trafficking of drugs has reached an unprecedented level. As a result, the Taliban has been able to consolidate its positions militarily and politically in recent years. This is a source of concern for the immediate and extended neighbors of Afghanistan. They see that they cannot fully rely on the US and NATO to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. Even if the US and NATO remain committed to this course of action, the risk of failure cannot be discounted.

As efforts to achieve a military victory over the Taliban have stumbled, the US and NATO cannot help but contemplate an "exit strategy". This is not openly discussed. However, the Transition should create precisely the conditions necessary for what can be termed a "military exit".

As expressed in the Declaration (20 Nov. 2010) by the Heads of State and Government of the nations contributing to the UN-mandated, NATO-led ISAF in Afghanistan, the

mission in Afghanistan remains the Alliance's key priority. The Declaration also states that the Alliance's commitment to Afghanistan will endure beyond ISAF's current mission and is intended to be consistent with broader international efforts. The Declaration further dwells on a comprehensive approach, stating that ISAF's mission is part of a wider international community effort. The Alliance recognizes that success cannot be achieved by military means alone and is willing to contribute to increased coordination among key international stakeholders in Afghanistan, working in a comprehensive approach involving both civilian and military actors. The Declaration therefore recognizes that many of Afghanistan's challenges cannot be addressed without the constructive support of Afghanistan's regional partners. Enhanced regional co-operation is essential for lasting stability and is most effective when it is regionally owned, and pursued in a transparent and constructive manner.

The Declaration actually states that while NATO remains committed to Afghanistan, the military involvement should, within a reasonable time, be replaced with non-military efforts. The very language of commitment "beyond ISAF" suggests that the military engagement is nearing exhaustion, which drives the search for a "comprehensive approach" and the engagement of regional partners.

While military and security professionals strongly resist an "exit strategy", the politicians may have to play into the expectations of the people. Among voters, fatigue with the Afghan war is growing, even more rapidly due to the lack of any visible progress. For this reason, the politicians may withdraw their support from the professionals at very short notice. This puts in doubt not only the capability, but also the commitment for prolonged efforts. The commitments of the US and NATO remain in place, but may well erode, rather than be reinforced.

### **Alternative means of regional engagement in Afghanistan**

The neighbors of Afghanistan acknowledge that they bear a substantial share of the war burden. They have to face numerous additional consequences of the conflict. Growing drug trafficking from Afghanistan is the most serious, but not the only issue in this regard.

With both the capability and the commitment of the US and NATO to defeat the Taliban in flux – and with the costs of war for the neighbors growing – these countries feel uncomfortable relying solely on the United States. They are seeking a more active policy in addressing Afghan problems.

However, the role of regional countries cannot be considered as entirely positive. In the early 1990s, when the Kabul government fell after Russia's withdrawal of support, Pakistan and Iran pursued very active roles in Afghani politics. This went beyond reasonable limits and greatly contributed to the destabilization of Afghanistan.

There are several ways in which regional states may engage more actively in Afghan affairs. Regional countries may become local partners for the US and NATO. Or they may interfere in Afghani internal politics, aggressively pursuing their interests and fighting for influence. Alternatively, regional countries may carve up zones of influence in Afghanistan, based on ethnic solidarity and economic connections. Finally, regional actors may establish regional compacts on Afghanistan, cooperatively investing in security and economic progress in the country.

The regional countries can play a positive role and contribute to stability in Afghanistan if they pursue certain commonly shared interests. The top priority for all immediate and extended neighbors of Afghanistan is internal Afghani security, regional security and socio-economic progress.

In an atmosphere of regional instability and chaos in Afghanistan, direct security threats may emerge for neighboring countries. At a minimum the neighbors have to face the consequences of increasing drug production in Afghanistan. These consequences are multiplying: from criminal to social, economic and other spheres.

Regional instability is a perfect justification for the presence of outside forces in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is at the very center of comprehensive geopolitical concepts developed in the last two decades. Whatever the changes in world politics, regional countries cannot always resist the temptation to interpret the foreign military presence in Afghanistan through the prism of geopolitics. This becomes even more likely as more and more signs surface revealing the geopolitical side of the US engagement in Afghanistan, including the aim of establishing permanent military bases in several regions of Afghanistan. This geopolitical competition, inevitable with any foreign permanent military presence in Afghanistan, works against the goal of stability and security, which is shared by all neighbors of Afghanistan. A foreign military presence, in particular of non-regional actors, inevitably implies prolonged instability, which is against the interests of Afghanistan's neighbors.

The monopoly of NATO and the United States on a solution to the Afghan problem seems to be drawing to a close. In the past six years, it has failed to bring the desired result. If current trends persist, a situation similar to that in the Middle East may develop in Afghanistan and Central Asia: no chance for a settlement, while the hotbed of tensions generates a demand for U.S. security services. At a minimum the US and NATO need more cooperation and assistance from some of the major regional actors, such as Russia, China, India, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan. This puts the immediate and extended neighbors of Afghanistan at a crossroads: to seek cooperation with the US and NATO in Afghanistan or to form a regional perspective on Afghanistan.

The benefits of seeking a partnership with the US and NATO are quick. A regional country, entering such a partnership, can gain leverage or even an advantage over other

regional countries. This may seem particularly lucrative, as some regional countries are in competition and are eager for quickly obtained advantages over their competitors. However there is also a price to be paid for allying with the US in Afghan politics. This is the price of joining the US geopolitical game for Afghanistan as a junior partner. And as the number and scope of US demands on junior partners unsurprisingly grows, the situation deteriorates. In the end a junior partner will have to fully share responsibility for US policy, while having very little capacity to actually shape it. On the whole, the choice of allying with external powers in Afghanistan means ultimately sacrificing medium- and long-term interests for the sake of some immediate benefits.

The alternative is to work for the sake of regional stability, rather than entering a regional competition on Afghanistan's soil. This means creating a regional framework and necessary content to address Afghanistan's challenges.

### **Principles for a regional compact on Afghanistan**

The available framework for regional cooperation on Afghanistan is the SCO. All Afghanistan's neighbors, except Turkmenistan, have the status of members or observers at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Afghanistan itself, while lacking any official status within the SCO, has a tradition of positive engagement with the Organization, as the Afghani President has visited annual SCO summits for many years. It is therefore quite natural to use the SCO format to discuss the Afghan problem and to work out an independent SCO position and policy, especially due to the lack of recent progress in the country. An SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group has been established, and on March 27, 2009, Moscow hosted an international conference on Afghanistan under the aegis of the SCO to discuss documents proposed by the Group. Other regional formats are also emerging. In August 2010 leaders of Russia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan met in Sochi. This was followed by lower-level follow-up meetings to develop economic projects for Afghanistan. In 2011 these four Presidents met again in Dushanbe and re-enforced their commitment to economic cooperation. The 2010 Istanbul summit brought together nearly all regional actors and ISAF contributors, thus shaping a broad framework for strong regional engagement. In 2011 the effort has further developed, with the Istanbul summit now bringing together all regional stakeholders and ISAF contributors. In general all regional countries should be integrated within a framework to tackle Afghan issues and develop a regional consensus on Afghanistan. The grouping of countries for particular projects may vary, but a regional compact on Afghanistan can be possible only if based on common interests and principles.

Regional cooperation on Afghanistan should be based upon consensus on the following points:

1) The neutrality of Afghanistan. Afghanistan should be a neutral state without any foreign military bases. The status of neutrality may be interpreted more widely than merely the absence of permanent military bases, but cannot be narrower than that.

2) Territorial integrity. Afghanistan has traditionally seemed non-integrated at times, with a fragile balance between the central Kabul government and regional provincial authorities. From time to time this inspires ideas of dividing Afghanistan into Pashtun and non-Pashtun states. This leads to plans to redraw the map of the entire region, implying changes to the borders not only of Afghanistan itself, but also Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Without going into an elaboration of the risks of broad re-mapping, it is enough to say that Afghanistan is not likely to be divided even if time and effort are invested, much less will it fall apart through internal dynamics.

3) A capable Kabul government and the right balance between central and provincial authorities. The Kabul government should not necessarily be strong, but it should be capable. To determine and then fine-tune the appropriate balance between central and provincial authorities will be one of the major challenges. However, neighbors of Afghanistan can use their traditional connections to parts of Afghani society to facilitate the successful implementation of this task.

4) Socio-economic development. In this field the regional partners of Afghanistan can be and should be of the most help. While at the moment Afghanistan receives large-scale inflows of international assistance from various state and private donors, as well as international financial institutions, the net results remain modest. Most of the assistance has been based on the concept of the “free market economy”, meaning that international donors have targeted infrastructure and social projects – roads, hospitals, schools etc. As this infrastructure became available and an acceptable level of security was established, private investment was expected to follow, with the “invisible hand of market” boosting the economy. However, private investment does not favor Afghanistan and will hesitate to become involved, even if there is substantial progress in security. Afghanistan needs multi-billion-dollar investment plans in agriculture and industry, targeted at creating jobs and providing a local tax base. Only with the latter will an economic recovery of Afghanistan become sustainable. And such a scale of investment in medium- and long-term projects is possible only with state guarantees or private-state partnership. Neighbors of Afghanistan should target exactly this kind of project, creating jobs and a sustainable local economy.

### **Conclusion: job creation – the focus for further economic efforts in Afghanistan**

All regional countries face the choice between allying with outside players, in disregard or even opposition to their fellow regional players, or developing regional consensus

and cooperation on Afghanistan. They hesitate at this crossroads, intimidated by the pressure of time and the price of the choice. With enough trust among regional players the choice would be fairly clear. Without such trust, the choice is hard. Nonetheless, the rewards of overcoming this deficit of trust and developing regional cooperation on Afghanistan are too great not to be attempted.

While the role of regional countries is inevitably expected to grow, certain considerations still hinder this process. Although ISAF contributors describe the situation in relatively optimistic terms, pursuing the Transition and looking forward to a time “beyond ISAF”, it is difficult for regional actors to ignore all the negative consequences (or even direct failures) of ISAF engagement in Afghanistan. Drug-trafficking is the most obvious example of this sort. But more generally the security achievements in Afghanistan are significantly below regional expectations. The multi-billion-dollar commitments from individual and institutional donors have failed to place Afghanistan on a positive economic trajectory with the pace of economic development meeting the expectations of the local population.

The ISAF contributors have shaped a demand for more regional engagement and cooperation. While this is clear to the immediate and extended neighbors of Afghanistan, the terms and conditions for such engagement remain undefined. So far most of the regional actors have been eager to assist the ISAF in its efforts. The successful establishment of the Northern distribution network is an example of this. However, although regional actors are keen to have their concerns and perspectives on Afghanistan taken into consideration as their role expands, at the same time they are not ready to take responsibility for security in Afghanistan, which would also mean to take responsibility for other’s misdoings and mistakes. This shift in responsibilities and perspectives will take some time to produce new agreements. Nonetheless, stronger regional cooperation on Afghanistan in some form seems inevitable.

Further efforts to promote economic projects in Afghanistan should be focused on creating jobs and providing a base for local taxation. Although large-scale, multi-billion-dollar projects attract most of the attention, they will take extraordinary time and effort to be implemented. In the meantime, job creation efforts should be concentrated on medium-sized economic projects, preferably in agricultural and industrial sectors.

*Any views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.*