

Afghanistan and its Neighbours: Forging Regional Engagement

Summary

- There have been growing calls in recent years for regional actors – whether individual countries or regional organizations – to engage more fully with Afghanistan. Following the political transition to a new presidency and Western troop drawdowns in 2014, there may now be more space for regional involvement in the country. That the Afghan state has proven more resilient than anticipated in the face of recent political and security challenges may be helpful in this respect.
- In the past, efforts to forge a regional approach to Afghanistan have been complicated by neighbours' perceptions of its problems as peripheral to other challenges and concerns. Pakistan, for example, subordinates its relationship with Afghanistan to its foreign policy objectives with respect to India. This may be changing, however.
- Initiatives emphasizing Afghanistan's strategic centrality to its neighbourhood, and its potential as a transport hub, must compete with an alternative view that locates the country on the edge of several regions.
- Prospects for collective engagement *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan remain generally poor, but China's increasing diplomatic activity could have a positive impact given the common interests between China and the West in stability in Afghanistan. In particular, China's influence over Pakistan – still the most important regional actor for Afghanistan's stability – could encourage the latter to play a more constructive role, for example by supporting dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government.
- The effectiveness of regional engagement will depend, above all, on a domestic political settlement that includes an accommodation between the Afghan government and the Taliban.



Introduction

This briefing paper examines the regional dimension of efforts to address the multiple challenges facing Afghanistan, as the country transitions to a new political and military order following the presidential election and Western troop withdrawals of 2014. A decade defined by the presidency of Hamid Karzai and the presence of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has given way to a new government, led by President Ashraf Ghani, and a military environment in which the end of the ISAF's mission has left Afghan forces responsible for the country's security. Afghanistan faces enormous challenges in achieving political stability, improving security and developing its economy. This paper reviews the extent to which regional actors are constructively (or otherwise) engaged in those processes, and considers the future prospects for – and obstacles to – a more integrated multilateral approach.

Since the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan in Tokyo in 2002, the country's neighbours have been involved in numerous dialogues regarding its peace and stability. Encouraging regional ownership of the challenge, however, was not prioritized by the United States and other Western countries until after the 2011 announcement that they intended to complete their military withdrawal by the end of 2014. It is only in the past three or four years, therefore, that calls for the region to take greater collective responsibility for Afghanistan have intensified. This has been accompanied by warnings of the impact that chaos in the country would have on its neighbours. Advocates of regional engagement have also emphasized the potential economic benefits that would accrue from increased connectivity through a stable Afghanistan.

Keeping the region engaged with Afghanistan is imperative for stability in the country and its neighbours. Several multilateral forums have provided some scope for international cooperation on Afghanistan. These include newly created groupings such as the 'Heart of Asia' process (originally launched as the Istanbul Process in 2011), as well as more long-standing organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). But for a variety of reasons – including their origins, remit and internal tensions – such groupings have had a limited impact. While the West has started to encourage regional engagement with Afghanistan, the manner of the desired engagement has been ill defined.

Attempts to forge a regional approach to Afghanistan hinge on three fundamental conundrums.¹ First, while each of the country's neighbours would benefit from its stability, each also views the situation there as secondary and peripheral to other issues. Pakistan, for example, has tended to look at Afghanistan through the prism of relations with India. Afghanistan's other neighbours make similar calculations, whether this is Iran *vis-à-vis* its relationship with the United States or the countries of Central Asia with respect to Russia and the West.

Second, advocates of Afghanistan's centrality to its region must compete with an alternative viewpoint that locates the country on the fringes of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. In addition to reinforcing the country's geopolitical marginalization, this encourages overlapping interpretations of the challenges facing it and thus makes a coordinated approach difficult. In the event that the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, the first response of several of its neighbours would be to tighten border security rather than to contemplate intervention.

Third, the effectiveness of regional engagement is above all contingent on a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In other words, regional engagement must be understood not only as a route to stability in Afghanistan, but as a product of it. The fundamental question is not so much about intervening to increase security, but rather about which countries are able and likely to cultivate a political process between the government and the Taliban, either bilaterally or through an existing regional channel. Whichever other regional actors are involved, Pakistan's support on this issue will be crucial.

Efforts to forge a regional approach

For a long time after the start of the West's military intervention in Afghanistan, regional ownership of the situation within the country was not an immediate priority. Western leaders' stated desire was to remain engaged bilaterally until the mission was accomplished, and the regional dimension was ignored or overlooked. This began to change with acknowledgment of the challenges shared by Afghanistan and Pakistan. While the Taliban's resurgence began in earnest around 2005, it took a couple more years for the nature and importance of these linkages to become widely accepted. Once this happened, attempts to engage the region focused on Pakistan, as reflected in the coining of the term 'Af-Pak'. Many Western countries, led by the United States, created special envoys for Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2009. Even as recently as 2010, however,

¹ See the findings of the 'Afghanistan in a Neighbourhood Perspective' 2009–15 project conducted by the Peace Research Institute Oslo, <http://www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=906>.

the lack of commitment to a broader regional approach was demonstrated by the exclusion of India, as a result of Pakistani pressure, from the Istanbul Conference on Afghanistan.

There was a more serious Western focus on encouraging the region to become involved in Afghanistan's future after the 2011 announcement of the scheduled withdrawal of troops. The Istanbul Process of the Heart of Asia countries – now largely referred to as the Heart of Asia process – was established in that year. There was also widespread propagation of the notion of a 'New Silk Road', wherein Afghanistan would become a connectivity hub between Central Asia, South Asia, China and the Middle East. The idea that Afghanistan could become a source of wealth was also floated, through emphasis of the oft-quoted statistic that the country has mineral reserves worth \$1 trillion.

These ideas initially encountered scepticism on the part of Afghanistan's neighbours, partly for geopolitical reasons. The economic arguments for regional integration also put the proverbial cart before the horse. In the absence of security and stability in Afghanistan, any potential to develop trade and mining will remain very hard to fulfil.

Exacerbating these problems, Central Asia and South Asia are among the least connected regions of the world in terms of trade or transport links. While countries in the two regions may benefit from greater engagement with Afghanistan, they would benefit even more from boosting engagement among themselves, yet this has not happened. At the same time, they tend to see connectivity with Afghanistan more in negative terms – intertwined with the spread of instability, drugs, refugees or radical ideologies – than in terms of economic opportunity.

While there is a clear economic case for the energy-rich countries of Central Asia to be better connected to the energy-poor ones of South Asia, initiatives to that effect are frequently interpreted as attempts to 'turn' the Central Asian republics away from Russia. For example, the idea for a Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline was originally proposed by the Soviet Union but was later co-opted by the United States as a means of reducing Russian influence in Central Asia. Russia has only recently pledged to support the pipeline. Despite these problems, the Northern Distribution Network – established in 2009 as an alternative to the NATO supply routes through Pakistan – provided a means to encourage Central Asian states to remain engaged with Afghanistan, if only out of self-interest. As US relations with Pakistan deteriorated in 2011–12, the possibility was raised that Western military equipment would have to be taken out through the states of Central Asia.

Afghanistan's approach

Afghanistan itself has tried to 'regionalize' its search for a solution to its domestic security challenges, but the opportunities to do so were limited while Western troops were present in large numbers. Its approach has comprised a number of overlapping strategies. First, Afghanistan has promoted an aspirational message regarding the positive role it could play as a transport hub and source of raw materials. Second, a depoliticized functional approach has encouraged regional engagement on a range of confidence-building measures that would provide mutual benefits to participants. Third, the country has engaged in trilateral and quadrilateral meetings, participated in various regional forums and used these forums to articulate the message that it is gradually becoming a stronger state.

Afghanistan joined the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) programme in 2005, became a member of SAARC in 2007 and was accepted as an observer at the SCO in 2012. The Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan has met since 2005 and has become the key forum for developing the New Silk Road concept. And since 2011 the Heart of Asia process has focused on supporting Afghanistan through confidence-building measures in areas such as disaster management and counter-narcotics, and through building economic linkages. This process also seeks to engage the countries of the region in multilateral political consultations regarding Afghanistan's trajectory. However, there are justified concerns about the paucity of funding for the Heart of Asia process, the potential lack of broader political buy-in in Afghanistan and its neighbours, and the slow pace of implementation.

Afghanistan has also initiated a number of trilateral and quadrilateral initiatives over the past decade. These include: the Afghanistan–Iran–Tajikistan dialogue (2005); the Afghanistan–Pakistan–Turkey dialogue (2007); the Afghanistan–Iran–Pakistan dialogue (2007); the Afghanistan–Pakistan–Tajikistan–Russia dialogue (2009); the Afghanistan–India–United States dialogue (2012); the Afghanistan–China–Pakistan dialogue (2012); and the Afghanistan–Pakistan–Iran–Tajikistan dialogue (2014). Most of these have produced little more than generic pledges to strengthen regional security and stability, improve economic and trade cooperation, and enhance transport links. In March 2014, during the Afghanistan–Iran–Tajikistan trilateral dialogue, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan proposed the establishment of a Council of Economic, Investment and Cultural Cooperation between the three countries. The Afghanistan–Pakistan–Turkey dialogue, meanwhile, has focused on security and peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Pakistan but has not yet resulted in significant action. Other areas of

proposed collaboration in this dialogue include improving transport links.

The trilateral dialogues between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkey and China respectively are the most ambitious. For instance, in talks with China there have been discussions on encouraging an 'Afghan-owned' and 'Afghan-led' reconciliation and reconstruction process, which was also endorsed at an SCO meeting in September 2014. The most recent talks involving Turkey, meanwhile, emphasized the steps taken by Pakistan to support peace in Afghanistan and the importance of the Afghan High Peace Council (established to engage with the Taliban), reflecting the two-way relationship between Afghan security and regional engagement.

The challenge in all of these initiatives is to find ways in which engagement with Afghanistan benefits its neighbours, regardless of their possible scepticism about its political trajectory. And the benefits are not as clear cut as they may at first appear. For example, if regime figures in Central Asia are connected to drugs trafficking, as is widely alleged, counter-narcotics cooperation may have little traction. Similarly, if border officials are implicated in the drugs trade, better cooperation between border agencies may even have negative consequences.

Even measures likely to bring mutual economic benefits are not necessarily straightforward. The lack of connectivity in South Asia and Central Asia reflects the fact that nationalist politics often trump potential economic opportunities. On some issues Afghanistan's neighbours even have a perverse incentive to desire instability. For instance, the issue of water is not covered by any regional process. Afghanistan's downstream neighbours have benefited from the degradation of its water infrastructure and deforestation over the past three decades. Afghanistan's reconstruction could reduce downstream water flows, to neighbouring countries' detriment.

President Ashraf Ghani, who was inaugurated in September 2014, recognizes that improving regional connectivity is a priority for Afghanistan's economic future. In an interview soon after taking office, he said:

We need to define the model for the economy of a country like Afghanistan which is landlocked. Our goal is to transform Afghanistan into transit hub for the region and that means we have to create the conditions for that.²

Ghani recognizes that the principal condition for this vision to be realized is domestic security. With the withdrawal of Western troops, progress towards a political settlement is needed for Ghani's message regarding Afghanistan's pivotal

regional potential to resonate. If the country appears to be destabilizing, if the Taliban appear to be taking advantage of ungoverned spaces in southern and eastern areas, or if the Afghan army appears unable or unwilling to act in parts of the country, its neighbours may decide instead to engage with local political actors in Afghanistan at the expense of the central government.

As mentioned, any settlement will require the Afghan government to reach a political accommodation with the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan apart, Afghanistan's neighbours are broadly hostile towards any form of Taliban resurgence – although some, such as China, acknowledge the reality of the need to include the Taliban in political negotiations.³ Pakistan appears especially ambivalent about the role of the Taliban, in part because it perceives contact with the movement's Afghan commanders as tactically necessary for tackling the Pakistan Taliban forces who attack targets in Pakistan and then take refuge across the border in Afghanistan. Pakistan's approach since the announcement of Western troop withdrawals has been driven by fears that Pakistan Taliban fighters would use ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan as a base. These fears were heightened by scepticism about the durability of the Afghan state as it approached the political and military transitions scheduled for 2014.

Pakistan's approach to the Taliban is also informed by the changing position of the Afghan government. Under former president Karzai, Afghan and Western troops targeted the Afghan Taliban but ignored groups that did not threaten the Afghan state. Ghani has changed this policy. In December 2014, US and Afghan troops attacked various Pakistan Taliban bases in southern Afghanistan. This sent an important message to Pakistan. The subsequent terrorist attack on a school in Peshawar in December 2014 was probably an attempt by the Pakistan Taliban to deter Pakistan from cooperating with the new Afghan government. If so, it failed. Pakistani and Afghan forces have since announced joint military operations, and Pakistani thinking appears to have shifted on the basis that the Afghan state has demonstrated its resilience.

Prospects for multilateral regional engagement

Given precedents in the region and around the world, the prospects for multilateral regional engagement to solve Afghanistan's internal security challenges are generally poor. Afghanistan's neighbours have an interest in its stability but expecting the region, however defined, to

² 'Interview: Ashraf Ghani', *The Diplomat*, 2 October 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/interview-ashraf-ghani/>.

³ While Iran is believed to have given some support to the Taliban, it has no interest in seeing a Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan. While the Taliban may be Iran's 'enemy's enemy', they are not its friend.

contribute collectively to this may be misplaced. External intervention in armed conflicts is commonplace. One study suggests this occurred in 101 out of 150 conflicts between 1945 and 1999.⁴ Most of these interventions, however, were conducted by individual countries or through the United Nations. The number of conflicts in which regional organizations have themselves intervened is very few. Where 'regions' of sorts have intervened, this has usually been at the behest of a regional hegemon, with action channelled through a regional organization. Applying this logic to Afghanistan, only China might be able to play such a role. This would probably involve China working through one of the various multilateral processes or trilateral/quadrilateral dialogues in the region.

Furthermore, a regional organization's willingness to intervene in a conflict depends in part on the reasons for its creation. These are varied and include, according to Kripa Sridharan: 'a strong desire for reconciliation and rebuilding after a destructive war; keenness to dampen ongoing intra-regional conflicts; and a need to avoid the embarrassment of being a region devoid of a regional entity'.⁵ Thus, a shared desire to build a peaceful region after the Second World War was one of the key reasons for the establishment of the European Union. Reflecting these origins, the EU has intervened in conflicts in its neighbourhood in recent times. Similarly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has helped prevent several disputes between its member states from escalating into armed conflict.

The regional organizations around Afghanistan are different. In South Asia the impetus to create multilateral groupings has a relatively short history. SAARC was founded only in 1985, and did not play a role either in resolving civil wars in Nepal or Sri Lanka, or in resolving disputes between India and Pakistan.⁶ The SCO is founded on the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of its members and therefore has not conducted any peacekeeping operations. As for the Arab League (members of which do not directly border Afghanistan), it has been described as the 'single least effective major regional organization in generating political and military cooperation to prevent and manage regional conflicts'.⁷

Although there is greater evidence that regional processes can play a positive role in a post-conflict environment – implying greater chances of effectiveness if a peace deal with the Taliban can be agreed – the idea of a multilateral

solution to Afghanistan's security challenges is further undermined by the absence of trust between many of the countries concerned. This prevents joined-up engagement. Some argue that without a grand vision to build trust among Afghanistan's neighbours, small confidence-building steps will fail to surmount underlying political obstacles. There are calls for some form of political compact under which the countries of the region would pledge to stop using proxies to undermine their neighbours, but this would require a sea change in approaches.

Afghanistan – trying to get off the periphery

For regional initiatives to be successful, countries also need to conceive of problems or opportunities in regional terms before working together to resolve or take advantage of them. Progress towards such a situation is most advanced in Europe, and regional groupings have also proven relatively effective in North, Central and South America, in Africa, and in Southeast Asia. In contrast, the idea of Afghanistan's centrality to its region is weakened by a counter-narrative that locates the country on the periphery of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East.

Compounding this problem is the weak coherence of these regions and, by extension, of the organizations that purport to represent their component states. Groupings defined solely geographically lack the cultural or historical roots that encourage deeper engagement. In Central Asia, existing groupings have generally been externally imposed and thus ineffective. Titular elites have emphasized 'nation-building as a means of reshaping cultural and political life', which has hampered regionalization.⁸ Similarly, that SAARC has achieved relatively little owes much to the tensions between its two largest members, India and Pakistan. India has attempted to create eastward-looking institutions that exclude Pakistan, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (usually known as BIMSTEC). Iran is not a full member of any pertinent regional grouping, though it has observer status with both the SCO and SAARC.

A desire to address these obstacles and create a regional forum with Afghanistan at its centre is what prompted the Afghan government, with Turkish support, to launch the Heart of Asia process and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan.

⁴ Patrick M. Regan, 'Third Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts', undated, <http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01241/WEB/IMAGES/THIRDPAR.PDF>.

⁵ Kripa Sridharan, 'Regional Organisations and Conflict Management: Comparing ASEAN and SAARC', Crisis States Research Centre, Working Paper 33, March 2008, http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/57416/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/c7945368-6b13-46cf-9066-78d2f6aaabf5/en/wp33.2.pdf.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Marco Pinfari, 'Nothing but Failure? The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council as Mediators in Middle Eastern Conflicts', Crisis States Research Centre, Working Paper 45, March 2009, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/wp/wpSeries2/WP452.pdf>.

⁸ Annette Bohr, 'Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order', *International Affairs* (Chatham House, May 2004), Vol. 80, No. 3, p. 495.

Looking ahead: the challenges of engagement

Whether or not multiple in-principle commitments to a stable Afghanistan will translate into effective regional policy is uncertain. All of Afghanistan's contiguous neighbours signed the Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations in 2002, pledging 'commitment to constructive and supportive bilateral relationships based on the principles of territorial integrity, mutual respect, friendly relations, co-operation and non-interference in each other's internal affairs'.⁹ Yet the reality is that Afghanistan is not the overriding issue for each of them. Pakistan has repeatedly stated that it wants stability in Afghanistan, but the extent to which it – or, at least, important elements in Pakistan – would countenance a solution that depended on India's engagement in the country is far from clear.

What is more, most of the countries in the region lack the capacity or the will to mediate a political process in Afghanistan. Many emphasize their opposition to infringing the sovereignty of other countries, and some are ill placed to act as honest brokers. Turkey has played an important role in facilitating regional engagement and has pledged to continue to do so, but its credibility and influence are compromised by the security breakdown in its own neighbourhood and the impact of its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in alienating other powerful actors. In Central Asia, the role of Turkey has also been seen as a throwback to the 1990s, when it was considered a proxy for the United States in attempting to turn countries away from Russia. Saudi Arabia has leverage over Pakistan, but has greater challenges closer to home. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates stand tarnished, in the eyes of some, by their decision to recognize the Taliban regime in the late 1990s. Their credibility is undermined by their ambiguous relationships with Islamist movements and their reluctance to crack down on funding of these by their own citizens. For its part, Russia, scarred by its past involvement in Afghanistan, is reluctant to deepen its engagement in a conflict relatively far from its borders.

India has been at the forefront of economic engagement, leading measures under the Heart of Asia process and hosting numerous business summits for Afghanistan. Although Pakistan prevents Indian goods from crossing its territory to enter Afghanistan, progress has been made under the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement to allow Afghan exports to move in the opposite direction. But its poor relationship with Pakistan makes India unable to lead a political process in Afghanistan.

The Pakistan–China nexus

Pakistan's role as a supporter of, or obstacle to, a political settlement with the Taliban will remain crucial. Western-sponsored efforts to achieve this outcome have made slow progress in part because Pakistan has waited to gauge the impact of the political and military transitions in Afghanistan. Pakistan's engagement – at whatever level – with the Afghan Taliban has been predicated on fears of imminent collapse of the Afghan state and on the desire to ensure political leverage inside the country following the Western military withdrawal. With a new president in office in Kabul and the Bilateral Security Agreement between the United States and Afghanistan signed, both of which suggest that the Afghan state has greater resilience than anticipated, the environment may now be more conducive for Pakistan to support an Afghan-led dialogue.

Yet, while Pakistan probably has the ability to impede the peace process – that is, by preventing the Afghan Taliban from engaging in negotiations with the Afghan government – it remains unclear just how much its influence can work to the opposite end and cajole the group's leadership to negotiate. Elements of Pakistan's military have links with the Afghan Taliban, but their leverage over the movement has long been disputed. Attempts by Pakistan's current civilian government to wrest control from the military over policy towards India and Afghanistan appear to have failed. The legitimacy and role of Pakistan's military have been based, historically, on Pakistan's identity in opposition to India and on the notion that India presents an existential threat to the country. However, the growing threat from the Pakistan Taliban has prompted new thinking, and for many in Pakistan this has replaced India as the foremost security challenge. If this results in Pakistan's military rethinking its approach towards India (which is far from certain at this point), Afghanistan could conceivably become a testing ground for potential confidence-building measures between Pakistan and India.

China is the one regional actor that can use inducements or leverage to make Pakistan a more constructive actor in Afghanistan. China shares the West's and India's desire for stability in the country, and now seems to see an Afghanistan strategy as necessary in its own right rather than as an extension of its foreign policy agenda in respect of Pakistan. For China, stability in Afghanistan would enable it to develop economic interests and address fears of separatist instability in the Muslim-majority autonomous region of Xinjiang. As a long-standing ally of Pakistan, China is in a position to encourage the latter to promote engagement between the Afghan Taliban and

⁹ 'Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations', 22 December 2002, <http://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-neighbourly-relations2002>.

the Afghan government. More broadly, it may be better placed economically than Western countries to exert influence. China's pledge in November 2014 of \$42 billion in investment in Pakistan – increased to \$46 billion by some estimates during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in April 2015 – suggests such a process may already be under way.

China has also recently become more directly involved in Afghanistan. While it had been reluctant to take a more overt role, it appears to have decided to become more assertive in response to the political and military transitions of 2014. In July 2014 China appointed a special envoy to Afghanistan, Sun Yuxi, who had previously served as ambassador to the country and to India. It has also announced that it will provide training for the Afghan police. While these signal deepening engagement, Sun stressed that China will not interfere in Afghanistan's domestic affairs, saying, 'The conflicts between different religious groups and races are too complicated.'¹⁰ China has interacted with the Taliban over the past decade, but it is increasingly concerned about the threat of Islamization and separatist violence in the Uighur community in Xinjiang. Moreover, as Barnett Rubin notes in a recent article for *Foreign Policy*, China's support for a settlement to bring the Taliban into the political system does not extend to tolerating a Taliban government.¹¹

China's involvement – which includes advocacy of a regional format for talks on reconciliation – has been welcomed by the West, Afghanistan and Pakistan and understood by others, including India. The United States appears to have concluded that it is a positive development. The decision by Ghani to make China the first country he visited as president suggests an Afghan desire for deeper Chinese engagement which appears to be paying dividends given the reported visit of a Taliban delegation to Beijing in November 2014.

Thus, there now appears to be a confluence of interests supportive of China playing a constructive role in Afghanistan. In the most positive interpretation, a paradigm shift could take place whereby a more self-confident India welcomes Chinese economic engagement and Pakistan devotes more energy to combating extremism. Were this shift to take place, the visions of a New Silk Road could yet become a reality.

Conclusion

Increasing signs of converging interests between regional actors offer some hope for improved stability in Afghanistan, but a positive outcome is not guaranteed. Much still depends on the success of the state in Afghanistan, the calculations of the Taliban, the Pakistan–Taliban nexus and the India–Pakistan issue. Continued demonstration of the resilience of the Afghan state appears to be prompting Pakistan's military to increase pressure on the Taliban, but the extent to which there is willingness within the Taliban for dialogue is less clear. Should there be renewed political in-fighting in Kabul or signs of government weakness, this will encourage those in the Taliban opposed to peace talks, regardless of Pakistani or Chinese pressure. Ultimately the commitment of the Afghan Taliban to a peaceful outcome in Afghanistan is unknown. It may believe that it can defeat the Afghan government militarily, and that holding out for a full Western withdrawal is its best policy. Alternatively, the Taliban may be too fragmented for any meaningful process to succeed.

Thinking in Pakistan has clearly evolved, but while there is now renewed commitment to targeting elements attacking the Pakistani state, how does the Pakistan military view similar groups operating in India, or attacking Indian targets in Afghanistan? Can progress be made in Afghanistan in the absence of dialogue between India and Pakistan? And what is China's real agenda? Is it attempting to facilitate an Afghan-owned and multi-layered peace process, or to cut a deal to enable some economic development in Afghanistan? Its engagement in peace processes in Africa has suggested that it puts economics before politics. Finally, in the event that a political process initially succeeded, how would anti-Taliban elements in Afghanistan respond?

Despite these caveats, the formation of what would seem to be a genuine international consensus, coupled with the survival of the Afghan state despite its various transitions, offers the best hope of persuading the Afghan Taliban to conclude that the time is ripe for dialogue rather than conflict.

¹⁰ 'Sun Yuxi appointed special envoy to Afghanistan', *South China Morning Post*, 19 July 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1556206/sun-yuxi-appointed-special-envoy-afghanistan>.

¹¹ Barnett R. Rubin, 'Is the Afghan Unity Government a Roadmap for Negotiations with the Taliban?', *Foreign Policy*, 20 October 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/20/is-the-afghan-unity-government-a-roadmap-for-negotiations-with-the-taliban/>.

About the author

Gareth Price is a senior research fellow at Chatham House, working on South Asia. His interests include the domestic politics and economics of the countries in the region, and their international relations. Before joining Chatham House, he worked at the Economist Intelligence Unit and a political risk consultancy, Control Risks Group, covering South Asia.

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