

POST-TALIBAN AFGHANISTAN AND REGIONAL CO-OPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

PETER TOMSEN

Peter Tomsen was US Special Envoy and Ambassador to Afghanistan, 1989-92. He is currently US Ambassador in Residence, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

A fresh geopolitical configuration in and around Afghanistan is emerging from the destruction of the Pakistan-supported Taliban-al-Qaeda regime. The remainder of this decade could witness the regional powers shift away from competition with each other for domination of Afghanistan. Conversely, a new innings of the centuries old 'Great Game' might unfold, repeating the all too familiar scenario of war, terrorism, drug trafficking, refugee outflows and instability in Afghanistan.

The benefits would be substantial should Afghanistan's neighbours choose the first alternative of regional co-operation in Central Asia. A stable Afghanistan could offer a Central Asian crossroads for regional and global commerce along a sweeping north-south and east-west axis. Global trade corridors intersecting at the centre of Eurasia would prove an economic boon to Iran, Pakistan, Russia and the Central Asian republics, as well as to Afghanistan itself. Pakistan – which cannot transit Afghanistan to market its products in Central Asia, the Caspian basin and China while instability persists in Afghanistan – would benefit the most. A shift from competition to co-operation among the major powers in Central Asia is by no means certain, notwithstanding the massive peace dividends. The historic rapprochement of regional states in post-World War II Western Europe and post-Vietnam Southeast Asia produced the enormously successful European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Collaboration for regional stability and common economic and political progress replaced internecine confrontation and conflict.

In Southeast Asia, the mending of long-standing bilateral disputes was a necessary prerequisite for successful regional co-operation. Malaysia and Indonesia needed to bury the hatchet over conflicting border claims that had erupted into an undeclared war in the early 1960s. The Philippines and Indonesia likewise set aside their border dispute in order to become partners in the successful Southeast Asian regional co-operation process culminating in ASEAN.

A similar trend toward regional reconciliation is needed in early twenty-first century Central Asia. This would entail, however, eschewing 'Great Game' geopolitics in favour of regional co-operation.

WHAT IS THE GREAT GAME?

The term 'Great Game' was coined by an official in the nineteenth century British Indian Empire. He was referring to the major regional powers' competition to dominate strategically located Afghanistan, where empires historically have rubbed together at the centre of Eurasia. Since Alexander the Great¹ entered the area of present day Afghanistan in the fourth century BC, foreign invaders have found it easy to get into Afghanistan – and hard to get out. Afghanistan's forbidding terrain and the stubborn tribes occupying it were often

underestimated by successive invaders. Mogul, Persian and British imperial armies followed one another into Afghanistan. Holed up in their mountainous redoubts, the proud, independent, self-confident Afghans proved hospitable to guests but not to invaders. As one senior British official put it almost two hundred years ago:

“To sum up the character of the Afghans in a few words: their vices are revenge, envy, avarice, rapacity and obstinacy; on the other hand they are fond of liberty, faithful to their friends, kind to their dependants, hospitable, hardy, frugal, laborious and prudent; and they are less disposed than the nations in their neighbourhood to falsehood, intrigue and deceit.”(2)

Late twentieth century invaders – the Soviets, followed by the Pakistani military aligned with Muslim extremists from the Persian Gulf – attempted to wield ideology to buttress their imperialism in Afghanistan. The Great Game took on global implications. The contest went beyond militarily subduing the Afghans to acquire another bit of territory on the periphery of empires to also include ideological pretensions. Moscow’s Cold War politics thus sought to project the inexorable spread of communism, with gains defended by the Soviet Army as necessary.(3) Soviet supported coups in 1973 and 1978 sought to move Afghanistan to the communist side of the Cold War ledger. The 1979 Soviet invasion attempted to confirm communist moorings for Afghanistan. Muslim extremism, sponsored by Pakistan’s military and radical Arabs aimed to replace Soviet-sponsored communism with Muslim extremism. The resultant ideological polarisation kept Afghanistan in a bloody trough of warfare for twenty-three years.

COLD WAR GEOPOLITICS AND AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan was one of many Cold War arenas of competition in which Soviet communism sparred with Western capitalism for over forty years. It was not, however, a major focal point of superpower contention for most of this period. Afghanistan was too remote to fit into the American alliance system ringing the Soviet Union. Partly for this reason, but mostly due to Afghanistan’s historic record of jealously guarding its independence, Moscow gave Afghanistan a relatively low priority. By the 1950s, the Soviet Union and its geopolitical ally India were attempting to convert Afghanistan into the upper lip of a strategic vice meant to crush Pakistan, a member of both the American-supported Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and the American-led Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union viewed Afghanistan in itself as a partner with which to align. Both manipulated Afghanistan towards serving its broader strategy against the other: Moscow to weaken American containment pressure along the USSR’s southern periphery, Washington to maintain Pakistan as the strong, strategic lynchpin connecting the CENTO and SEATO alliances.(4)

As the Soviet Union and India manipulated the ‘Pashtunistan’ issue to separate the Pashtun areas in Pakistan from the rest of Pakistan, they found an eager ally in Mohammed Daoud, the Afghan ruler from 1963 to 1973 (under the reign of King Zahir) and from 1973 to 1978 (after Zahir was deposed). Daoud, eventually assassinated in a KGB-supported communist coup in 1978, championed the Pashtunistan cause to strengthen his own political position inside Afghanistan. The United States, aware that Pashtunistan’s separation from Pakistan would destroy its ally, Pakistan, rejected Daoud’s appeals to Washington for military assistance. In 1954, Secretary of State John Dulles, in a formal diplomatic note, went beyond turning down Daoud’s request for US military aid. He instead urged Afghanistan to resolve the Pashtunistan issue with Pakistan. Adding insult to injury, Dulles sent a copy of the note to Pakistan’s ambassador in Washington. Thus alienated by Washington, one month later Daoud concluded

the first Afghan arms agreement with Moscow. Within a year, Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin visited Kabul to launch major Soviet military and economic aid programmes in Afghanistan.

In 1957, worried about growing Soviet penetration of the Afghan military and government, an American National Security memorandum belatedly advised:

“The United States should try to resolve the Afghan dispute with Pakistan and encourage Afghanistan to minimize its reliance upon the Communist bloc for military training and equipment, to look to the United States and other free world sources for military training and assistance.”(5)

The limited US military assistance programme that ensued was dwarfed by the inside track Moscow already had established within Afghanistan’s military establishment. Over time, the KGB and GRU ‘turned’ many lower- and middle-ranking Afghan army officers into Soviet agents during their military training in the USSR. Daoud, labelled the ‘Red Prince’ after his 1973 comeback in league with the Afghan Parchami communist faction, failed to walk the tightrope between maintaining Afghan independence and eluding the Soviet grasp. By 1977, his frantic effort to downplay Pashtunistan to avoid the Soviet trap by lessening tensions with Pakistan was a classic case of too little, too late. That year, the Soviets clandestinely brokered unity between the Afghan communist Khalqi and Parchami factions. Soviet-trained Afghan army officers, who were also members of the newly united Afghan communist party, led the 1978 military overthrow of Daoud. Daoud lost his life, gunned down in his palace by his own Afghan troops; Afghanistan lost its independence and tumbled into a bloody conflict which would last a quarter of a century.

PAKISTAN POLICY: OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?

Afghans are hopeful that outside intervention as well as the ideologies of communism and Muslim extremism have been sufficiently discredited to open a window of peace for Afghanistan and the region. The establishment of long-term stability, and economic and democratic progress for Afghanistan, however, will first depend mainly on improved bilateral relations between the major regional powers surrounding Afghanistan. Pakistan’s co-operation will be especially important. Despite Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf’s steps to clamp down on Islamic radicalism, Muslim extremist elements in Pakistan’s military, religious and political circles remain in place and could again play a spoiler role in Afghanistan. Incentives for a constructive Pakistani approach would include Pakistan’s desperately needed access to Eurasian markets and trade routes through a peaceful Afghanistan. The international community should also offer Pakistan a share of the international assistance that will accompany Afghanistan’s reconstruction.

Pakistan’s reasonable strategic concern about the revival of a two-front Cold War era security challenge must be addressed. Islamabad’s sponsorship of a radical Islamic government in Kabul had geopolitical origins with offensive and defensive qualities: offensive in creating ‘Islamic depth’ against India; defensive in preventing New Delhi and Moscow from once again manipulating the Pashtunistan issue to destroy Pakistan. Pakistan’s co-operation in restoring peace in Afghanistan is by no means certain because of insecurity over its Afghan border. Elements in Pakistan’s military and intelligence establishment are probably suspicious that the current moderate direction in Afghanistan may strengthen the leverage of archenemy India in Afghanistan, including on the lingering Afghan-Pakistani border dispute.

A worse case scenario for Pakistan's future course would conclude that Musharraf had no real choice but to support the rapid and intense American assault on Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda and the Taliban after 11 September. To reject joining the American-declared 'War on Terrorism' would have meant even further estrangement of Pakistan from the West internationally and continuing economic and social decay domestically. India's early and categorical declaration of its own alliance with the war on terrorism further limited President Musharraf's options to one: announcement of full support. The alternative risked a dangerous nightmare – a geopolitical US-Russian-Indian squeeze on Pakistan, which, as Musharraf was aware, Pakistan could not have resisted. Mixed with the carrots of lifted US sanctions, economic aid and some welcome new respectability, Musharraf and his colleagues abruptly abandoned the Taliban.

Pakistan's military leadership has since been preoccupied with managing the domestic and international fallout from the collapse of its policy of alignment with al-Qaeda, Pakistani religious parties and the Taliban to control Afghanistan. Musharraf fired the head of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate after he was confronted with intelligence that ISI was continuing to send ordnance to the Taliban in Afghanistan three weeks after the 11 September attacks in the United States. Next, two retired Pakistani scientists involved in Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme were detained based on evidence discovered in liberated Kabul linking them to al-Qaeda. Slowly, and also in reaction to Indian sabre rattling plus the kidnapping and murder of the journalist Daniel Pearl, the Musharraf regime has been sidelining radical Muslim elements inside and outside the government.

More agonising choices for President Musharraf, however, still lie ahead. Will Pakistan's military leaders seek to preserve their radical Muslim assets created over a twenty-year period? Pakistan's ISI, with Osama bin Laden and Pakistan's religious parties, constructed the extremist Muslim infrastructure along the Afghan-Pakistani frontier, which remains alive and well today. It includes a complex of over ten thousand religious seminaries (medreses), numerous training camps and staging areas for international Islamist elements. The infrastructure straddles the Afghan-Pakistani border, permitting free movement of thousands of radical Arabs and other foreign extremists still in Afghanistan into Pakistan and back into Afghanistan. After the fall of Kandahar, Jalalabad and Khost, nearly the entire Taliban cabinet plus thousands of armed Afghan and Pakistani Taliban have sought refuge in the Islamist infrastructure on the Pakistan side of the border. ISI elements since 11 September have known the location of bin Laden, Mullah Omar and their accomplices.

The paltry results of US efforts to locate al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders over the last two months clearly demonstrate that Islamabad is keeping its options open. Over the grave of the Taliban, Muslim extremist factions still in the Pakistani military and ISI could nurture the ascendancy of a new phoenix of radical Islam along the Afghan-Pakistani frontier.

A determined effort by General Musharraf to dismantle the Islamist infrastructure on the Pakistan side of the border would be welcomed by the West and the new Afghan regime in Kabul. Resolute Pakistan's co-operation in the apprehension of al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders would be a first major step toward restoring Pakistan's domestic political stability, economic growth and its re-emergence as a constructive member of the international community. Conversely, Musharraf may choose to obfuscate and temporise. This would translate into continued rhetorical support for the war on terrorism while waiting out the American military departure from the region; maintaining ISI ties to radical Afghan factions and al-Qaeda

remnants in the Pashtun belt on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border; and using those ties to disrupt the broad-based Afghan settlement process led by traditional anti-Taliban Afghan moderates. It is in the interests of the international community to encourage Pakistan toward the first approach.

RUSSIA AND IRAN: JURY ALSO OUT

Iran and Russia are more likely than Pakistan to follow a constructive approach to the Afghan settlement process. Tehran and Moscow, like most Afghan factions, do not wish to see Pakistan-based Sunni Muslim radicals again ensconced in an ungoverned, chaotic Afghanistan. Each will attempt to maintain lines of influence into Afghanistan through their intelligence agencies. Tehran will watch closely for indications that Washington is seeking a strategic foothold in Afghanistan to 'encircle' Iran and arrange for Caspian basin energy pipelines to favour Afghanistan over Iran.

Russia and China are also wary of long-term American designs on Afghanistan and Central Asia. They are sceptical about American assurances that US bases in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Central Asian republics are temporary. For their separate geopolitical reasons, Iran, Russia, China and Pakistan are no doubt also apprehensive about the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) currently settling into Afghanistan and likely to grow in size over the upcoming months.(6)

Pakistani President Musharraf and Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai's 8 February joint press conference on a Caspian basin pipeline certainly drew a mixed reaction in Tehran, Moscow and Beijing. Karzai announced that the two leaders had "agreed" that a pipeline carrying Caspian gas through Afghanistan to Pakistan "was in the interest of both the countries."(7) Russia, which hopes to keep Caspian energy flows going north through its pipeline system, and Tehran, which is manoeuvring for pipelines to transit Iran, could seek to undermine a Central Asia-Afghanistan-Pakistan (perhaps India as well) pipeline. Both, plus China, will look askance at Western, especially American, energy companies building the pipeline.

Therefore, the jury also remains out regarding Russia and Iran's ultimate course on Afghanistan. Moscow and Tehran so far have generally supported the intra-Afghan settlement process. The co-operation among UN, American, Russian, Iranian and European diplomats in assisting the Afghan towards compromise in Bonn was a promising sign. There may be a growing realisation that making Afghanistan again a cockpit for Great Game competition among contending regional powers will inevitably lead to another Afghan war and even more dangerous instability, terrorism and narcotics trafficking spreading outward from Afghanistan into Eurasia.

NEW AFGHAN REGIME: AVOIDING PAST MISTAKES

Moscow, Islamabad and Tehran have caused enormous destruction in Afghanistan over the past two decades, especially the former two. Afghans, however, need to look to the future. Restoring internal stability and pursuing reconstruction over the next decade will be difficult enough even if Kabul has good working relations with all of its neighbours. Stability and reconstruction will remain elusive if the Afghan government allows itself to be reeled into an entangling alliance with one of its neighbours against another neighbour, as occurred in the Cold War period.

The new Afghan regime should instead play a leading role in any regional conciliation process. Repeating Daoud's mistake – directly confronting an important regional power like Pakistan – would be foolish. Daoud belatedly found himself in the beckoning grip of a Moscow all too eager to support the Pashtunistan cause as part of its broader Cold War strategy in Central Asia. The Soviets valued Pashtunistan as a vehicle to destroy Pakistan and wedge American influence out of South and Central Asia. Washington, for its part, erred in waiting too long to pull Daoud away from the Soviet trap. The Afghan strongman calculated he could outfox Moscow and play one superpower off against the other. Daoud's miscalculations contributed significantly to the warfare and suffering which has engulfed Afghanistan since the 1978 Soviet-supported Afghan communist coup that overthrew him.

The bitter lesson from Daoud's bumbling is clear for the current generation of Afghan leaders: champion Afghan sovereignty and independence, resist falling under the spell of – and do not unnecessarily antagonise – any of Afghanistan's six neighbours or nearby Russia and India. A well-considered and implemented Swiss version of neutrality would be a useful reference point for the new Afghan regime. The leaders in Kabul should, like the Swiss, balance relations with more powerful neighbours, maintain good relations with each, magnify Afghanistan's international personality, use Afghanistan's diplomatic resources to reduce tensions between its neighbours and discourage outside attempts to stoke Afghan internal conflicts. Daoud's disastrous course violated all of these tenets.

A CENTRAL ASIAN ASEAN?

A loose, regional co-operative organisation along the lines of ASEAN would serve the long-term interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian Republics. Support from Russia, India, China, Turkey, the European Union and the United States could buttress the process, which would parallel the regional co-operation processes in South Asia (SAARC) and in North Central Asia (the Shanghai Five).

A series of TRACK 2 conferences in Britain and the United States during the 1960s worked out the basic blueprint for the ASEAN Treaty. Participants included academic specialists on Southeast Asia and officials from the six Southeast Asian governments involved. Once the conceptual architecture was in place, officials representing the six moved onto TRACK 1 and themselves gave concrete formulation to a formal inter-governmental agreement on regional co-operation. ASEAN proved a striking success from the very beginning. It shielded out the Great Power conflicts buffeting Southeast Asia during and after the Vietnam War. Aside from generating stability within the ASEAN treaty area, the economics of each of the ASEAN partners has benefited enormously from the lowering of tariff barriers to co-operation in the areas of finance and investment.

A similar roadmap to Central Asian co-operation could be implemented, starting with TRACK 2 academic-governmental meetings inside or outside the region. Over time, thickening dialogue among the eight Central Asian states(8) would strengthen bilateral ties between participants as they reach for the common economic and political benefits of overarching regional co-operation.

AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Great Powers outside Central Asia have influenced the cauldron of war in Afghanistan during the past two decades. Their consensus on a co-operative multilateral Central Asian grouping

would be vital to the success of the process. India and China, for example, could decide to impede a regional reconciliation process. Many in India's ruling circles wish to 'keep Pakistan down'. They see India's strategic interests served by isolating and encircling Pakistan. New Delhi could, accordingly, attempt to collude with Russia and block Pakistan's association with a Central Asian regional association of nations. China's posture would likely be heavily influenced by its Pakistan ally. Beijing's main strategic preoccupation is to maintain Pakistan's 'pull' of Indian military resources towards the north-west quadrant of the South Asian sub-continent, away from the eastern regions of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia where Chinese influence is gradually spreading. Conservative ruling elements in Russia, particularly in military and intelligence agencies, might argue that a Central Asian regional mechanism would further direct the flow of Caspian basin pipelines south and along an east-west axis, rather than north through Russia itself.

A wider international conference on Afghanistan could helpfully mollify such potentially negative tendencies, in particular if it parallels the evolution of a Central Asian regional co-operation organisation. Best sponsored by the United Nations Security Council, the conference might focus on Afghanistan security and reconstruction, but also address obstacles to South and Central Asian peace and security generally.

The successful 1955 International Agreement on Austrian Sovereignty and the 1975 Helsinki Accords would offer valuable precedents to exploit. The 1955 Austrian State Treaty concluded by the US, some of its NATO allies and the Soviet Union resulted in the pullout of all foreign occupation forces from Austria. The treaty produced Austria's permanent neutrality. Austria became a virtual de-militarised island in heavily militarised central Europe. Creation of the Austrian buffer assisted stability on the continent up to the end of the Cold War.

More a listing of principles and norms than a binding agreement, the Helsinki Accords encouraged political stability, economic co-operation, human rights and open communication among the thirty-five North Atlantic and European conferees. The Accords also recognised existing borders – an approach that would play a useful role in resolving the troublesome Pashtunistan and Kashmir issues in Central and South Asia. Most South Asian scholars believe that giving international legality to the de facto Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as the Line of Control dividing Indian- and Pakistani-controlled areas of Kashmir is the only possible solution to settle these border disputes, which have fuelled a series of wars over the last half-century and could ignite more. A broadly inclusive Helsinki-type international conference could give 'cover' to leaders in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan to initiate productive bilateral boundary negotiations. Once the negotiations are underway, the International Court of Justice in The Hague could assist the parties to reach a final solution.

TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL CONSENSUS ON CENTRAL ASIAN PEACE AND STABILITY

The inescapable conclusion is that peace in Afghanistan and the region is inextricably linked to co-operation among the major Central Asian regional powers and a wider constellation of nations outside Central Asia. ASEAN, the Austrian State Treaty and the Helsinki Conference succeeded in moderating tensions, promoting stability and encouraging co-operation by building regional consensus. The same general framework can be used to establish regional institutions and habits of co-operation in Central Asia. Plunging into another Great Game innings of conflict in Afghanistan would be a disaster for Afghanistan, the region and the

world. Breaking the cycle of competition among regional powers for domination of Afghanistan will be a challenge. What is now needed is policy creativity and ‘new think’ to meet and overcome that challenge.

1 Ancient folklore, from the Caucasus to India to Russia, records Alexander the Great as ‘Iskandar’. Kandahar, a slightly altered version of ‘Iskandar’, is named after Alexander the Great. Afghan parents even today occasionally name their sons Iskandar.

2 Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, 1815.

3 The Brezhnev doctrine, just invoked in Czechoslovakia in 1968, posited that the Soviet army would ensure that any nation entering the ‘Socialist’ camp could not slide back to capitalism.

4 CENTO members were Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Britain. SEATO members were Pakistan, Thailand, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines. The United States was a signatory to the SEATO alliance. It did not formally join CENTO, but participated in CENTO meetings and provided assistance as well as encouragement to CENTO members.

5 Declassified Documents Reference System, Vol. 5, No. 1, Fiche No. 44B (NSC 5617).

6 Britain is scheduled to pass leadership of the ISAF to NATO partner Turkey in April.

7 Kyodo report, drawn from a Dow Jones news item, 8 February 2002, New York.

8 Turkmenistan may decide not to participate, reducing participants to seven.