



## A F G H A N I S T A N

# THE CHALLENGES OF ATTAINING A REGIONAL SOLUTION

*By JOHN F. O'CONNELL*

**S**ince taking office in January of 2009, President Barack Obama and his national security team have insisted that a regional approach to Afghanistan is critical for success. Indeed, as early as the waning days of the Presidency of George W. Bush, it appeared that achieving success in Afghanistan would require the support of regional state actors as well as others in the international community. On paper, it seems so simple: Afghanistan's neighbors will derive significant benefit from a secure and stable Afghanistan. But as the old adage implies, the devil is in the details. This article broadly dis-

cusses the benefits of a regional approach to Afghanistan and its neighbors and the inherent obstacles that may never be overcome.

### **Why Care about Afghanistan?**

Afghanistan is a landlocked country geostrategically located at the crossroads of South, Central, and Western Asia. It is bordered by nuclear neighbors Pakistan to the south and east and China in the far north-east, as well as a potential nuclear state in Iran to the west. (Add Russia and India to the mix, and we have a region with four nuclear states.) The Central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan round

out the north. Historically, Afghanistan was at the center of the southern route of the old Silk Road. Afghanistan is often referred to as a Rubik's Cube, which could not be more appropriate. The Rubik's Cube is an agonizingly complex three-dimensional puzzle with an alleged 43 quintillion (18 zeros) permutations, but only one correct alignment.<sup>1</sup> Not unlike the cube, Afghanistan is a conundrum that frustrates the United States and its allies as they attempt to solve the structural

---

Lieutenant Colonel John F. O'Connell, USAF (ANG), is the Staff Judge Advocate for the 177<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, Egg Harbor Township, New Jersey.

Afghan flag atop observation post overlooking border of Afghanistan and Pakistan

problem of moving the parts independently without the entire mechanism falling apart.

Admittedly, Afghanistan is not completely analogous to the Rubik's Cube, which has only one correct solution. Perhaps it is more of a high stakes card game, requiring the patience of regional players as they maneuver to build the best hand possible. But, like a card game of this nature, regional players must decide if they are "all-in" in hopes of realizing the enormous potential economic benefit in reestablishing the long dormant continental land routes across Eurasia.

Aside from the U.S. proxy war with the then-Soviet Union following that country's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, Afghanistan had wallowed in this neglected corner of the world, nearly ignored by the United States until that bright, blue-skied Tuesday morning of September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, which were orchestrated by Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda organization, Operation *Enduring Freedom* was launched as teams of U.S. and British special operations forces joined with the Northern Alliance to topple the Taliban government and capture or kill bin Laden. As Taliban and al Qaeda forces fled across the porous border into Pakistan's western frontier to regroup, a new Afghan government under Hamid Karzai was formed in December 2001. Reconstruction of a war-weary Afghanistan began in early 2002, and there was renewed hope for the Afghan population, but by March of 2003 the focus of the United States and its allies shifted to a new war in Iraq. What little optimism there was for Afghans began to fade as the Taliban crept back into their lives, forming a shadow government in many parts of the country.

Near the end of his second term, President George W. Bush moved toward a regional approach to the Afghanistan problem set. As Jessica Matthews noted in her introduction to a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report on the viability of a regional strategy for Afghanistan, "the *Washington Post* reported as early as November 11, 2008 that 'At [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael] Mullen's direction, the map of the Afghanistan battlespace is being redrawn to include the tribal regions of western Pakistan.'"<sup>2</sup> With the incoming administration of Barack Obama, the concept of "AfPak" was introduced, and with the Obama administration's second

strategic review of the Afghan war, it became clear that not only Pakistan's cooperation was so inextricably linked to achieving success in Afghanistan, but also Pakistan itself had to have equal priority.<sup>3</sup> But what about Afghanistan's other neighbors?

### A Regional Solution: From Their Perspective

The need for a regional approach to the war in Afghanistan was clearly articulated by then-U.S. Central Command Commander General David H. Petraeus during remarks to a conference hosted by the United States Institute of Peace only 12 days before Barack Obama was sworn in as the 42<sup>nd</sup> President. General Petraeus stated:

*It's not possible to resolve the challenges internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges especially in terms of security to Afghanistan's neighbors. . . . [The Coalition] will have to develop and execute a regional strategy that includes Pakistan, India, the Central Asian States and even China and Russia along with perhaps at some point Iran.<sup>4</sup>*

On the surface, it seems so obvious that a regional solution is the answer the United States and the coalition have been searching for that one wonders why it has not happened already. Surely a stable and secure Afghanistan, with open and safe trade and transit routes, must be in the interest of regional actors and the international community at large. Perhaps a review of the interests or objectives of each state actor and what obstacles need to be overcome will shed some light on the illusive "regional approach."

of the neighboring countries would benefit from Afghanistan realizing its objectives, there are several impediments to Afghanistan doing so, some of which include the relationship between India and Pakistan, particularly concerning Kashmir; Russia and the Central Asian Republics' disagreement over the former's preferred sphere of influence in the region; and border disputes and water-sharing disagreements with Afghanistan's neighbors.<sup>5</sup> Many of the impediments date back to the British and Russian colonial era, are interwoven throughout the region, and would require complex multilateral agreements to resolve if the parties could even reach agreement. But as Haroun Mir notes in his essay on Afghanistan, "the more practical approach should focus on exploring opportunities rather than trying to fix what countries of the region have not been able to achieve for themselves."<sup>6</sup>

As Afghanistan and its neighbors begin to realize the untapped potential, regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Economic Cooperation Organization, which have been timid in their actions thus far, should be encouraged to take the lead in fostering economic cooperation and free trade and transit through a revival of the old Silk Road.<sup>7</sup> The continued development of regional energy projects to transport electricity from Central Asia to Pakistan and India, and the construction of rail and highway links between South and Central Asia as well as China and Iran, will set in place the critical infrastructure needed for development of the region as a whole. Again, the approach seems so simple—why has it not happened yet? Lack of political will

*it seems so obvious that a regional solution is the answer that one wonders why it has not happened already*

### Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a poor, landlocked country, and as such is dependent on its neighbors and other regional countries for the bulk of its *legal* trade.<sup>8</sup> Afghanistan's national interests, therefore, include achieving internal security and stability, maintaining friendly relations, and establishing itself as the "trade and transit hub linking South and Central Asia as well as China with Iran and the rest of the Middle East."<sup>9</sup> While most

among the regional leadership, as well as an inability to look beyond historical conflicts, are the culprits.

### Relevant Players and Impediments

**Pakistan.** As discussed earlier, it is generally acknowledged that Afghanistan's success—however loosely defined that is—is dependent on the cooperation of Pakistan. However, take a contentious border dispute between the two countries, mix in a strategic

**U.S., Pakistani, and Afghan military leaders at conference in Kabul**



partnership agreement between Afghanistan and India, and combine those with an unhealthy dose of Pakistani paranoia and we have the underpinning for Pakistan's destabilization of Afghanistan. Despite the great economic benefits that it could derive from a stable Afghanistan, Pakistan has instead chosen to undermine the Karzai government through its tacit support of the Taliban. Blind paranoia toward India drives Pakistan's need to control Afghanistan and disrupt economic and security relationships with India.

To the delight of China, the paranoia also dictates that the Pakistani military position troops on the eastern border with India instead of the western border (assuming that they would even want to engage with Taliban or al Qaeda fighters), thus forcing India's hand to focus on the Pakistani border and not direct its attention to China and the Sino-Indian border dispute, most recently the result of the century-old McMahon Line. Almost every decision that Pakistan makes is Indo-centric, whether it is denying Indian influence in Afghanistan or gaining any international support against

India. Even other regional states such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are looked at through an Indo-centric lens and viewed as a threat because an alternative supply route through those countries would lessen the U.S. reliance on Pakistan, thereby diminishing its importance and benefiting India.<sup>10</sup> The bottom line is that in Pakistan, anything and everything India does is aimed at weakening Pakistan. Pakistan must take positive steps to eliminate state support for Taliban terror. However, as Frédéric Grare noted:

*Pakistan is a revisionist power and, in the eyes of India, an aggressor. It will continue to feed its own paranoia. For this reason, concessions to a Pakistan that will not renounce terrorism as a means of pursuing its foreign policy objectives [are] likely to lead to a resurgence of the very organizations the coalition has been trying to eliminate for the past eight years. In a regional context where the political balance might have been altered in favor of Pakistan, such concessions would constitute regression and would make little sense from a security perspective.<sup>11</sup>*

**India.** No doubt there is an intense strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan. While Pakistan's actions are Indo-centric, India's interests in Afghanistan extend well beyond its rivalry with Pakistan. India's objective is for increased trade and new economic ties with Central and Western Asia through traditional land routes. India has well-founded concerns for security in Afghanistan. Given the abrupt departure of India from a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in 1996, India clearly has a strong interest in developing a long-term strategic partnership that includes stronger economic ties as well as security training as a means of containing or reversing the wave of militant Islamic fundamentalism.

India, however, is fearful of a rushed U.S./coalition exit from Afghanistan before the Taliban is weakened to the point of ineffectiveness. Gautam Mukhopadhyaya notes that such an outcome could conceivably be worse than the Taliban rule of 1996–2001 because of “the extent to which jihadi groups have now gained ground in Pakistan, strengthened ties with the Taliban



**Soldier with Kandahar PRT adjusts laser on M4 carbine for member of Indian consulate as part of effort to build sustainable infrastructure capacity**

and al-Qaeda, and assimilated the ambitions and methodology of al-Qaeda (for example Lashkar-e-Taiba).<sup>12</sup> While historically India's stance on the Taliban has been absolute, it has opened a small window of compromise by indicating support for the Afghan government's effort to reconcile and reintegrate former fighters, though a fair amount of skepticism remains.

India supports the U.S.-led effort in Afghanistan and believes that the development and buildup of the Afghan National Security Forces is the best course of action to set the conditions for a transition to Afghan takeover of security responsibility. India also supports the coalition counter-insurgency campaign, but would like to see a more robust political, economic, and diplomatic strategy interwoven into the effort and endorses the inclusion of other regional players to include Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics.<sup>13</sup> Finally, India believes that its role in stabilizing Afghanistan is through continued capacity-building: the development of institutions, business and human capital, and good governance that allows the Afghan state to "provide for the security and welfare of its own citizens with a view to an independent, pluralistic, democratic, and united Afghanistan. It favors

stronger, more Afghan-centric, and more inclusive regional economic and political approaches to the country's problems."<sup>14</sup>

**Iran.** While it would seem that India's national interests and objectives broadly converge with most other regional players—Iran, Russia, the Central Asian Republics, and China—it should come as no surprise that Pakistan plays the spoiler yet again. While all benefit from a stable and secure Afghanistan, there are differences between India and the other regional players that may not be overcome. India enjoys good relations with Iran and supports a more inclusive regional approach, to include Iran. However, Iran's deep animosity toward the United States not only prevents Iran from pursuing shared interests in Afghanistan, but also leads it to take actions that undermine U.S. efforts there and are detrimental to Iran's own national interests—actions such as narcotics trafficking and a return to power of the anti-Shia Taliban (against whom Iran almost went to war). That said, both India and Iran have a shared interest in not seeing Afghanistan dominated by Pakistan, and have issued joint statements pledging to cooperate in stabilizing Afghanistan. Interestingly, as Karim Sadjadpour reports, Iranian officials

have privately admitted that a U.S. presence in Afghanistan helps Iran by keeping "the Taliban at bay and serves as a source of leverage for Tehran."<sup>15</sup>

**Saudi Arabia.** Iran also has a strained relationship with Saudi Arabia, a regional power and rival that views the current government in Tehran as a threat to security in the region and the Muslim world. Though the United States is Saudi Arabia's most important foreign partner—a relationship the House of Saud would like to preserve—the interests of Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan are often in conflict with those of the United States; Saudi Arabia was one of just three countries to recognize the Taliban government when it took power in Afghanistan, so it is no surprise that the Saudis would like to see in Afghanistan an Islamist state focused on the "domestic propagation of religion and enforcing moral strictures within the country," much like their own Wahhabist (Salafist) state. Saudi Arabia has already provided a sizable amount of financial support to Afghanistan, mostly in the form of reconstruction and direct foreign aid, and also supports reconciliation efforts with moderate elements of the Taliban. While the United States and Saudi Arabia have different views of success in

Afghanistan, the United States should leverage the close alliances of both Afghanistan and Pakistan with Saudi Arabia to reach an agreeable outcome.

**Central Asian Republics.** Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have a national interest in seeing the coalition prevail, as they believe that it is tied directly to their own national security. However, each of the Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as well, must include their relationship with Russia in any calculus regarding support to the coalition. As Martha Brill Olcott notes in the Carnegie report, Russia's willingness to invest in the completion of Kyrgyzstan's Kambarata Dam led to Kyrgyzstan pressing the United States in negotiations for withdrawal from Manas Air Base.<sup>16</sup> To persuade the Central Asian Republics to take on more of a participatory role, they must be convinced that U.S. interest in the region is enduring and that its support for Afghanistan and its neighbors is unwavering.

**China and Russia.** China's approach to policy in Afghanistan is simple—what does Pakistan think? China's primary concern when formulating Afghan policy is to do no harm to its relationship with Pakistan since it needs Pakistan to counter India's perceived bid for domination in South Asia. As previously mentioned, China is more than content to have Pakistan amass troops on its border with India. Pakistan is also a significant trading partner with China. That said, China does not want to see the coalition fail in Afghanistan, as it could threaten China's billions in investments there in the Aynak copper mine as well as other natural resource and mineral reserve projects—projects that can provide Afghans with thousands of jobs and help stabilize the Afghan economy.

Both China and Russia would like to see a stable and secure Afghanistan. Similarly, both are wary of a large and/or permanent presence of the United States in the region. By contrast, Moscow and Beijing differ regarding the Taliban: because of the support the Taliban provided to Chechen rebels, Moscow would like to see the Taliban dismantled, while Beijing is indifferent and would likely defer to Pakistan. But suppose for a moment that China could leverage its relationship with Pakistan and persuade the Pakistani military to reposition troops from the Indian border west to the Afghan border. Such a move would have

great benefit to Afghanistan and the region as a whole, but would Pakistan take such action against the Taliban?

From the Russian perspective, China's rise to power in Central Asia has been at Russian expense. Now add on the status and influence that the United States has garnered in Central Asia, also at Russian expense, and it is easy to see why Russia must balance its interest in Afghanistan with an eye toward U.S. influence in the region. It must be noted, however, that Afghanistan considers Russia not only a close neighbor, but also an important political and economic partner.<sup>17</sup> While Russia has not contributed much monetarily to Afghanistan's stabilization and reconstruction, it has delivered both military and humanitarian aid, as well as forgiven nearly 90 percent (USD 10 billion) of Afghanistan's debt.<sup>18</sup> Russia has also expressed a willingness to help train Afghan security forces, and in 2010 Russia donated 20,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles and arranged a sale of up to 80 Russian Mi-17 helicopters. Moreover, with over 30,000 Russian citizens dying each year because of heroin, the flow of Afghan heroin into Russia is of grave concern, causing former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to call heroin addiction a matter of national security.<sup>19</sup>

As stated earlier, on paper, a regional approach to resolving the conundrum of Afghanistan seems straightforward and logical. It is an almost universal interest of the regional players to see the stabilization of Afghanistan. It is not until we start to peel the onion back and examine the complex relationships between the relevant players that it becomes apparent why a regional solution has not been reached in the nearly 11 years since the Afghan War commenced. It is critical for all stakeholders to review the consequences of failure in Afghanistan and to contemplate what could be achieved with regional cooperation. It must be made clear to Russia and China that our strategy is not aimed against them, but complements their own national interests in both the security and economic lanes. In combination with a secure and stabilized Afghanistan (and Pakistan), a revival of Central Asia's historic trade and transit routes will benefit all stakeholders. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "The Perplexing Life of Erno Rubik," *Discover* (March 1986), 81, available at <[www.puzzlesolver.com/puzzle.php?id=29;page=15](http://www.puzzlesolver.com/puzzle.php?id=29;page=15)>.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley J. Tellis and Aroop Mukharji, eds., *Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2010), 2, available at <[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional\\_approach.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional_approach.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> General David H. Petraeus, "Remarks," Passing the Baton Conference, Washington Convention Center, Washington, DC, hosted by the United States Institute of Peace, January 8, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> In its final Afghan Opium Survey for 2007, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) shows that opium is now equivalent to more than half (53 percent) of the country's licit gross domestic product (GDP) and the total export value of opiates produced in and trafficked from Afghanistan in 2007 is about \$4 billion, a 29 percent increase over 2006. The UNODC report also indicated that 93 percent of the nonpharmaceutical grade opiates on the world market originated in Afghanistan. See "Opium Amounts to Half of Afghanistan's GDP in 2007, Reports UNODC," November 16, 2007, available at <[www.unodc.org/india/afghanistan\\_gdp\\_report.html](http://www.unodc.org/india/afghanistan_gdp_report.html)>.

<sup>6</sup> Tellis and Mukharji, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>17</sup> "Afghanistan welcomes Russian business—Afghan president," January 21, 2011, RT News, available at <[www.rt.com/news/afghan-leader-first-visit-russia](http://www.rt.com/news/afghan-leader-first-visit-russia)>.

<sup>18</sup> "Russia and Afghanistan," Institute for the Study of War, available at <[www.understanding-war.org/russia-and-afghanistan](http://www.understanding-war.org/russia-and-afghanistan)>.

<sup>19</sup> Megan K. Stack, "Heroin Addiction Spreads Like Wildfire in Russia," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2009, available at <<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/sep/25/world/fg-russia-heroin25>>.