

GEOPOLITICS OF AN AFGHAN SETTLEMENT

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The road to an Afghan political settlement must proceed through two challenging rings: an inner ring of conflict among Afghans, plus an outer ring of nations manoeuvring for influence against each other inside Afghanistan. The two rings overlap. External powers use Afghan factions as surrogates to serve their own competing objectives in the region. This essay will concentrate on the outer ring, examining the geopolitical incentives and disincentives motivating outside powers to promote - or to prevent - an Afghan political settlement.

PAKISTAN BUILDING 'ISLAMIC STRATEGIC DEPTH'

Since the 12 October 1999 military coup in Pakistan, Islamabad's interference in Afghanistan in pursuit of 'Strategic Islamic Depth' against India has increased, not decreased. The powerful Pakistani military Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) supports a "joint venture"¹ of radical Afghan, Pakistani, Arab and other foreign Muslim extremists inside Afghanistan. The ISI co-ordinated Islamist joint venture today includes: the Taliban; Osama bin Laden, his well-equipped 'Arab Brigade' of several thousand Arab militants from the Gulf, the Middle East and North Africa; Pakistani religious parties, notably the rabidly anti-West Jamiati-ul Ulema-ul Islami (JUI); the JUI's paramilitary arm, Harakat-ul-Mujaheddin (HUM); the hundreds of JUI-run madrassas (religious schools) supported financially in Pakistan by funds from the Persian Gulf; Afghan Muslim fanatics supported by Pakistan during the Soviet War; plus Muslim militants representing an array of radical Islamist groups from Central Asia and the Middle East to the Philippines and China's Xinjiang province in Asia.

In recent months, Pakistani Chief Executive, Pervez Musharraf, and his military regime have compensated for the Taliban's waning popularity inside Afghanistan by committing increasing Pakistani military manpower and resources to suppress the anti-Taliban Afghan resistance, led by Ahmad Shah Masood in northern Afghanistan. Jane's Defence Weekly cited Western military sources as estimating that combined Pakistani army regular troops, Pakistani religious students, bin Laden's Arab Brigade, and the medley of other foreign radicals in the ISI-directed joint venture comprised over thirty per cent of the 20,000-man force that overran opposition commander Masood's northern base at Taloqan in September.² Russia's Security Council Secretary offered a more inflated figure in charging that "30,000 foreign mercenaries" from "Arab nations, as well as Pakistani military men wearing Pakistani uniforms without concealment, and people from Chechnya" participated in the fighting.³ Jane's Defence Weekly reported further: "Pakistani military involvement appears to have gone beyond logistical support and the presence of military advisors to include the covert deployment of special forces."⁴ It quoted a Western military analyst as reporting the involvement of hundreds of Pakistani Punjabi-speaking infantry regulars displaying "extraordinary collective skills" during the attack.⁵ The assault on Taloqan was supported by Pakistani military-directed warplanes employing parachute dropped cluster bombs against Masood's forces.

AFGHAN SETTLEMENT LINKED TO KASHMIR INSURGENCY

The fighting in Afghanistan and the Kashmir insurgency are today interconnected, undercutting prospects for a peaceful resolution of either conflict. The ISI co-ordinated joint venture's control of areas in fragmented, chaotic Afghanistan is indispensable to sustaining the Kashmir uprising. Inside Pakistan, the JUI and a disparate collection of other Pakistani jihadi religious parties scour the populous Punjab and elsewhere in Pakistan to recruit fighters for Kashmir as well as for Afghanistan, first cycling them through the joint venture training camps inside Afghanistan. After training, they

join extremist Arab, Afghan and other foreign Muslim radicals for the 120-mile trip via road and mountain paths through north-west Pakistan to Kashmir. The Pakistani jihadi parties closely track the actions and words of Musharraf for any sign of 'betrayal' on either Kashmir or Afghanistan. Closure of the joint venture training camps in Afghanistan would stir opposition to Musharraf within the ISI and among younger radical elements in the Pakistani military, as well as from the vocal jihadi parties in Pakistan.

INDIAN INTRANSIGENCE HARDENS AFGHAN-KASHMIRI LINK

India's tough approach in Kashmir reinforces the Afghanistan-Kashmir connection. All significant Indian political parties resist any meaningful compromise on Kashmir. New Delhi's concerns about encouraging anti-Indian separatist movements stretching in an arc of disgruntled ethnic groups from Mizos and Nagas in the east to Sikhs and Muslim Kashmiris in the north-west and north, work against Indian flexibility for a negotiated solution in Kashmir. The Hindu-centred conservative ruling Bhartiya Janata Party leaders evoke the symbols and tenets of Hinduism accompanied by a not so thinly veiled historic antipathy against Muslims. Much of the Indian political establishment considers Kashmir a Muslim as well as Pakistani challenge to Hindu India, a challenge that has been effectively rebuffed by Indian military successes in two and a half wars since partition in 1947.⁶ India enjoys a four-to-one conventional military edge and is virtually certain to retain possession over the two-thirds of Kashmir on its side of the International Line of Control dividing Kashmir. As the bull's eye for Pakistani pressure on India, Kashmir is also the potential fuse of a powder keg that could explode into mankind's first nuclear weapons exchange.

India's alienation of Kashmir's majority Muslim population has made New Delhi's rejection of Pakistan's attempts to force Indian compromise all the stronger. Its current vulnerability in Kashmir is grounded in deep popular discontent with Indian rule among Kashmir's Muslim inhabitants. New Delhi's brutal, military response to the insurgency resembles in many ways Russia's indiscriminate crackdown in Chechnya. Indian Kashmir is today de facto militarily occupied by a 400,000-man Indian military and paramilitary force against the wishes of the bulk of its inhabitants.

Today, New Delhi may also see advantage in sustaining the inter-connected Kashmir and Afghan conflicts. This strategy isolates Pakistan internationally by cementing anti-terrorist co-operation between India and major world powers, which wish to counter the Pakistan-supported Taliban and international joint venture of Muslim radicals based in Afghanistan. Active Indian collaboration with the West, Russia and other governments against international Islamist militancy thus serves New Delhi's broader goal of weakening and isolating Pakistan in the Subcontinent.

Prospects are, therefore, dim that, short of another Indo-Pakistani war, the two largest South Asian nations will end their bloody stalemate in Kashmir for the foreseeable future. The intractability of the Kashmir stand off merely puts more weight behind the deadlocked status quo in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the civilian populations in Afghanistan and Kashmir remain linked in their misery. In both areas, savage, inconclusive fighting still produces thousands of civilian deaths annually, continuing deterioration of agricultural and transportation infrastructure, and worsening poverty.

PASHTUNISTAN: YET ANOTHER OBSTACLE

Like the Afghanistan-Kashmir linkage, the Pashtunistan controversy constitutes another major obstacle to resolving the Afghan war. Rarely mentioned by Pakistan, it is an important factor in Islamabad's strategic calculations.

The Pashtunistan controversy has historic roots. On 13 June 1947, worried about Britain's rush to terminate control of its Indian empire, Afghanistan sent a diplomatic note to the British Indian Government asserting that the overwhelmingly Pashtun inhabitants of the region between the Russo-British agreed 1893 Durand line and the Indus River were Afghans and must decide themselves whether to join Afghanistan, Pakistan or India, or to become independent.⁷ The Afghan regime in Kabul was rebuffed by the British and later the Pakistanis.⁸ Afghanistan persisted in keeping the Pashtunistan issue alive following Pakistan's independence. On 30 September 1947, Afghanistan

voted against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations and initially withheld diplomatic recognition of Pakistan.⁹

Throughout the post-Independence period, Afghan-Pakistani friction over the Pashtunistan issue precipitated occasional war rhetoric, troop movements along their boundary, long periods of closed border crossing points, and severing of trade relations. Strategically, Afghanistan colluded with India to pressure Pakistan through most of Pakistan's post-independence existence.

Pakistan's support for radical Muslim domination of Afghanistan has in part been based on keeping the Pashtunistan issue suppressed. Afghan Pashtun tribal leaders still cite Pashtunistan as an unresolved problem. Small Pashtun parties on the Pakistan side of the border, such as the Pashtun National People's Party, call for the creation of a Pashtun homeland. In contrast, radical Muslim Afghans like Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Taliban mullahs de-emphasise state borders in favour of uniting with the Muslim umma (community of believers) wherever it may be - Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir, the Middle East or Central Asia. The Taliban Pashtun mullahs also see common cause with Pakistan's military leadership in assisting them to withstand opposition to Taliban rule from Afghan Pashtun tribal leaders. During the three hundred years of their rule in Afghanistan before 1978, the more moderate Pashtun tribal aristocracy successfully kept Muslim extremists like the Taliban from exploiting religion to gain influence and power.

Pakistan's concerns about the Pashtunistan issue therefore contribute to Islamabad's resistance to a broad-based Afghan settlement process as well as Pakistani favouritism for the Afghan radical Muslim factions. An inter-ethnic political consensus among Afghan groups would inevitably sideline the Taliban in favour of traditional tribal and clan leaders. Pakistani strategists and the joint venture have so far effectively blocked emergence of a religiously moderate Pashtun tribal alternative to the Pashtun Muslim radicals through weapons transfers, financial means and assassinations, such as the 1999 assassination of prominent Popalzai tribal leader, Abdul Ahad Karzai, in Quetta.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

In his memoirs, former US Secretary of State George Shultz wrote about an exchange between then President Reagan and Pakistani military dictator Zia ul-Haq during the lead-up to the 1988 Geneva Accords that led to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan:

"Several hours later, President Zia, the truly authoritative figure in Pakistan, called President Reagan.... I heard the President ask Zia how he would handle the fact that they would be violating their agreement. Zia replied that they would just lie about it. 'We've been denying our activities there for eight years.' Then, the president recounted, Zia told him that, 'Muslims have the right to lie in a good cause'."¹⁰

Zia's policy of denial continued into the post-Soviet period, when Pakistan replaced the Soviet Union as the major outside power attempting to establish its hegemony inside Afghanistan.

Since the Soviet withdrawal, two Pakistani Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers and Pakistani ambassadors abroad have portrayed Islamabad's Afghan policy as opposed to a military solution and supportive of a broad-based Afghan political settlement process. Senior military as well as civilian Pakistani officials and diplomats regularly join counterparts at international forums in describing a military solution as impossible to achieve in Afghanistan.

ISI actions on the ground, ultimately directed by Islamabad's military leaders, belie these high level, official assertions of Pakistani policy. As they resigned in disgust, the previous UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and his predecessor, Norbet Holl, lashed out at Pakistan's blatant pursuit of a military solution in Afghanistan.¹¹ The massive Pakistani involvement in the fall 2000 Taliban military offensive has only reinforced the conclusion that Islamabad cynically continues its futile quest for a military solution in direct contradiction to Pakistan's official positions and rhetoric.

IRAN: FACILITATOR OR OBSTACLE TO AN AFGHAN SETTLEMENT?

Tehran appears to have much to gain from a broad-based political settlement in Afghanistan. Peace in Afghanistan would offset mounting instability to Iran's west in the Middle East. Tehran's continued testy relations with Iraq, which hosts the Iranian dissident Mujahidin-e Khalq, and friction with neighbours in the Gulf and the Caucasus, constitute further incentives for Iran to strive for stability along its eastern Afghan flank.

Iran shares a cultural, linguistic affinity with northern Afghanistan's non-Pashtun elements, which suffer the most under Taliban rule. Tehran resents the atrocities regularly visited upon the Shiah Hazara minority by Sunni fanatics among the Taliban, Pakistani and Arab forces in Afghanistan. It fears the Taliban-style of radical Sunni extremism moving north into the new Central Asian republics, which could, in turn, produce more barriers to Iranian influence in the Caspian basin. An inter-ethnic Afghan regime chosen by consensus would inevitably be more moderate, less susceptible to Pakistani and Saudi control, and more accepting of Afghanistan's Shiah minority than the Taliban.

A legitimately chosen, broad-based Afghan regime would also be more receptive to international cooperation on narcotics smuggling, a major headache for Tehran along the Iranian-Afghan border. Iran recently revealed that 740 drug dealers and 174 Iranian police officers were killed in narcotics-related battles during 1999.¹²

Over the past two decades, Iran and Pakistan have competed for influence in Afghanistan, supporting opposing factions. Tehran's principal goal in Afghanistan has been to resist the ascendancy of a radical Sunni regime in Kabul, supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. While Soviet-supported Afghan communist regimes were in Kabul, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia ensured that the Iran-backed Shiah Mujahidin received minimal representation in Mujahidin institutions. This exacerbated already strained Afghan Shiah-Sunni tensions as well as Iranian-Pakistani mistrust.

Tehran still perceives Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban, supported by Saudi Arabia, as a coordinated attempt to isolate Iran. Riyadh's extensive contributions of weaponry and cash, through ISI and Saudi-based Muslim aid institutions, to Afghan Sunni and Arab extremists fighting in Afghanistan continue. There is a possibility that the slow Saudi-Iranian rapprochement underway since the 1998 Tehran-hosted OIC Islamic summit will eventually lower Saudi-Iranian tensions and ameliorate their competition in Afghanistan. For the foreseeable future, however, it is likely that Riyadh and Islamabad will continue to resist any expansion of Iranian influence in Afghanistan.

During the four years the fractious Sunni-dominated Mujahidin regime occupied Kabul before the Taliban seized the capital in 1996, Iran, through delivery of weapons and logistical support to mostly Shiah groups, manoeuvred to establish two corridors of influence inside Afghanistan: one from the Iranian border through the central Shiah Hazarajat to Shiah-dominated west Kabul, the second along Afghanistan's northern tier via Shiah-populated Mazar-e Sharif and across the Amu Darya into the Central Asian republics. This strategy ended in disaster for Iran when the Pakistan-Saudi supported Taliban victories in central and northern Afghanistan in 1996-98 destroyed what foothold Tehran had managed to acquire along those corridors. During the fall of 1998, Iran deployed 200,000 troops to the Afghan border following the Taliban execution of Iranian diplomats (mostly intelligence officials) and an Iranian journalist in Mazar-e Sharif. Reacting to the recent Pakistan-Taliban 'peace' offensive, Iran publicly declared that Pakistani and Taliban media predictions of improvement in the Taliban's relations with Iran were inaccurate. Tehran called for progress on resolution of the Mazar-e Sharif murders and Taliban action against narcotics smuggling.¹³

Since its setbacks in Afghanistan, Iran has adopted a more aloof posture there. Tehran appears to be avoiding overt commitments - or opposition - to any single Afghan faction. It conducts a limited dialogue with the Taliban, even while covertly supporting Masood's anti-Taliban United Front. Iran has temporised in accepting delegations from the Rome-based former Afghan King, Zahir Shah, to discuss an Afghan political settlement but discreetly sent an emissary to Rome to meet Zahir's entourage. This may relate to the Iranian clerical regime's allergy to monarchs. It also underscores

Tehran's more recent posture designed to maintain tactical flexibility towards the different Afghan groups as Taliban popularity wanes. Iran's provision of sanctuary to Sunni Pashtun extremist Hekmatyar, after Pakistan abandoned him in favour of the Taliban, illustrates Iran's nimble realpolitik, as does Tehran's indirect sponsorship of the separate Afghan 'Cyprus' peace initiative led by Afghan diaspora figures in Iran and the West.

Iran's careful nurturing of options raises questions about whether it would support an internationally-assisted process to help the Afghans reach a broad-based political settlement. It is noteworthy that, in late 1999, UN Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi also blamed Iran and its machinations inside Afghanistan for the failure of his efforts to achieve a political settlement.¹⁴

Should a political process eventually make genuine progress, Tehran would likely insist that the Shiah Hazara minority receive a high quota of seats in the transition mechanism. This demand, as in previous negotiations on a fair Shiah representation in Afghan political bodies, would probably be resisted by the more numerous Sunni Afghan groups, with or without Pakistani or Saudi prodding.

Prominent quarters in Iran may see continuing political and military deadlock in Afghanistan as providing benefits to their interests. Prolongation of Afghan instability restricts Pakistan's capability to export its light industrial goods to markets in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where government-subsidised cheap Iranian consumer exports have proliferated. A peaceful Afghanistan would offer an unwelcome alternative to Iran for pipelines to carry Caspian basin oil and gas across Afghanistan to South Asia. Karachi and the new deep-water port at Gwadar would be a rival to Bander Abbas as a major international shipping outlet connecting the Indian Ocean with central Eurasia. Iran may also be concerned that an Afghan settlement could provide a larger opening for American and Turkish economic and political influence in the region.

RUSSIA AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS:

THE NEW GREAT GAME IS NOT IN AFGHANISTAN

Just as Pakistan attempts to steer Afghanistan towards serving its paramount strategic goal of confronting India in South Asia, Russia, the predominately Muslim Central Asian republics and China view Afghanistan as only one aspect of their own separate strategic game plans in middle Eurasia. For Moscow and the Central Asian republics, the twenty-first century's new Great Game is not taking place inside Afghanistan. Their principal strategic focus, like China's, is on the developing energy-rich East-West global transit and trade corridor north of Afghanistan connecting the dynamic economies of northeast Asia with Europe. Each, of course, must cope with the results of the externally fuelled, inconclusive warfare inside Afghanistan, including the disruptive export of Muslim terrorism and drugs into Eurasia.

As in Iran, domestic interest groups in Russia and the Central Asian republics - inside and outside of government and particularly within military and intelligence agencies - see advantages as well as disadvantages to maintaining the chaotic status quo in Afghanistan. Russia has attempted to exploit the Taliban-Pakistan Muslim extremist threat from Afghanistan to peddle Russian-dominated collective security and economic integration in Central Asia. Moscow's tactics mirror the nineteenth century divide-and-rule approach employed by Tsarist Russia as it expanded into Central Asia and the Caucasus. Overbearing Russian military and intelligence agencies sow ethnic conflict within Moldova and Georgia while undercutting Armenian-Azeri efforts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.¹⁵ Russia seeks to keep the Soviet-era monopoly on Caspian basin trade and transit lines pointed north. It resents co-operation by the Central Asian republics with Western governments and oil companies to direct the flow of Caspian resources through the southern Caucasus to Turkey, then on to Europe, or towards China and other Asian markets. Moscow also wishes to prevent Caspian gas and oil exports from competing with Russia's own current and potential hard currency markets in Europe and East Asia, while countering the economic and political penetration of the Caspian basin by the United States, Europe, Turkey, Iran and China.

In the Caucasus and Central Asia, the newly emerging political élite view Russia's approach as anti-nationalistic and bullying. Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, has made it clear he will continue the Yeltsin administration's policy of mobilising the Moscow-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to pull the newly independent countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus back into the Russian political-economic orbit. A 1995 Yeltsin-issued official Russian foreign policy document provided the framework for this approach in declaring:

"The main objective of Russia's policy towards the CIS is to create an economically and politically integrated association of states capable of claiming its proper place in the world community...to consolidate Russia as the leading force in the formation of a new system of interstate political and economic relations on the territory of the post-Union space."¹⁶

Only four of the eight newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia are active members in the Russian-championed CIS and its collective security arm, the Collective Security Treaty (CST): Armenia, which elicits Russian military and diplomatic favouritism in its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia also relies on Russia as a strategic balance against its traditional enemy, Turkey); Kazakhstan, which cannot afford to alienate Russia due to its large Russian minority (35 percent) and economic ties to Russia; tiny Kyrgyzstan, also still vulnerable to Russian economic pressures; and poverty-stricken Tajikistan, a virtual Russian protectorate, torn by a three-year civil war, hobbled by a corrupt, divided government whose writ does not extend to most of the country, and host to 25,000 Russian military and border guards.

Russia's heavy handed 'integration' pressures in Central Asia have fed the gradual emergence of GUUAM, a loose inter-state grouping whose main goal is to push away the Russian embrace and, with Western help, build the East-West global trade and transit corridor. GUUAM, as its initials suggest, is composed of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova.¹⁷

Romania and Bulgaria are considering joining GUUAM. Their participation would extend the GUUAM-backed East-West trade and transit corridor from the Black Sea into Europe. The American and Turkish supported \$3 billion main oil pipeline (MEP) from Azerbaijan through Georgia and Turkey to Turkey's Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, bypassing Russia and Iran, would give great impetus to GUUAM and its goals of strengthening both the political independence and economic development of its member states in the Caucasus and Central Asia.¹⁸

Uzbekistan is the anchor of GUUAM in Central Asia. Its 23 million inhabitants comprise almost half the population of the entire Central Asian region. Tashkent has resisted the stationing of Russian troops in Uzbekistan. Self-sufficient in energy and food, Uzbekistan is the second-largest producer of cotton in the world and ranks fourth in gold production.¹⁹ Tashkent's 34,000-man military force suffers from inadequate equipment and low funding. Still, it is the only effective national army in Central Asia. During the period July-October 2000, Uzbek military and paramilitary units succeeded in driving off armed bands of Muslim radicals belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which had infiltrated Central Asia from IMU bases in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan.

Given a choice between the Scylla of Russian neo-imperialism and the Charybdis of combating the Muslim extremist threat, Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov has made it clear he would prefer the latter. On 28 September, he attacked Moscow for exaggerating the threat of Islamist terrorism in order to re-establish Russian control of Central Asia. Karimov accused Russia of "attempting to portray the CST as the sole salvation of the region, and to compel Uzbekistan to join the treaty."²⁰ Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which border on Afghanistan and maintain sporadic dialogue with the Taliban, did not attend the Russian-sponsored 11 October CST meeting in Kyrgyzstan chaired by Putin and attended by the leaders of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Belarus. Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's visit to Uzbekistan was the highlight of Sezer's October 16-20, 2000 tour to the four Turkic Republics of Central Asia. Sezer and Karimov's joint statement identified the top priority in Turkish-Uzbek relations as blocking Soviet hegemony. A Turkish-Uzbek military co-operation agreement was signed, and the two presidents agreed on the "need to settle regional issues in coordination with the UN, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and NATO."²¹

Russia's massive economic and social problems at home, the war in Chechnya and resistance to its neo-imperial embrace by the newly independent states along the emerging East-West trade corridor reduce its ability to generate a Russian-led anti-Islamist united front in Central Asia. Suspicions of Russian intentions extend as well to its three CST treaty partners in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The three often sign CST documents but cannot be counted on by Moscow to furnish resources or military manpower to implement the agreed programmes.

Each of the Central Asian republics participates in NATO Partnership for Peace activities and enjoys a range of assistance from the United States, Turkey, Western Europe and China. Kyrgyzstan has welcomed Turkish military aid to resist IMU threats to its territory. China, under an agreement signed in August, has begun to supply light weapons and military provisions to Uzbekistan. In September, Karimov thanked the Chinese and took a swipe at Pakistan, asserting: "From now on Uzbekistan can count on military assistance of China in the repulsion of an aggression which is being planned at international centres on the territory of Afghanistan and other South Asian countries."²²

Russia's hand in Central Asia is further weakened by its lack of positive economic carrots to offer the region. At this stage, only the United States, Turkey, Western Europe, China, Japan and South Korea can provide the capital, technology and managerial skills required to exploit the economic potential along the East-West corridor. These governments and their private sectors are also poised to offer the new Central Asia and Caucasus states access to the dynamic markets of Europe and north-east Asia.

The long-term menace of Pakistan joint venture supported Muslim extremism in Afghanistan will remain a threat to the Central Asian republics and to Russia's northern Caucasus. IMU incursions from bases in Afghanistan in 1999 and 2000 precipitated a crackdown by the autocratic Central Asian republic regimes against manifestations of pro-Islamist sentiment. This hard-line reaction, including impositions of tough anti-Islamic laws and police measures, could, over time, prove counterproductive. The increasingly authoritarian rule by Uzbekistan's Karimov and other Central Asian leaders, plus continued lack of significant economic progress, may gradually enhance the appeal of Muslim radicalism and Shari'ah as a political alternative to Soviet-style autocratic rule.

CHINA IS BALANCING ALL CORNERS

China's economic influence and geo-political interest in Central Asia are steadily increasing. Beijing, however, is proceeding cautiously, wary of provoking Russia in what Moscow sees as its traditional sphere of influence. China worries about Muslim separatist sentiment among Uighurs and Kazakhs in its remote, western province of Xinjiang, where Han Chinese comprise less than fifty percent of the population. In its diplomacy with the Central Asian republics, including in the 'Shanghai Five' forum (China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), China enthusiastically co-operates in joint statements on common resistance to Islamist terrorism. China co-ordinates with each of its Central Asian republic neighbours in intelligence sharing and anti-terrorism activities targeting anti-Chinese Uighur and Kazakh elements in Central Asia. Beijing is also apprehensive that Pakistan-inspired radical Muslim activity could enter China via trade routes connecting southern Xinjiang with Pakistan's northern Gilgit region.

For the Central Asian republics, China is a model of successful transition from a centrally controlled to a market economy. It is a counterweight to Russia and the West, and a potential investor as well as customer for Caspian energy resources.²³ China has already outbid Western companies and invested nearly \$1 billion dollars in two Kazakh oil fields; this outlay could rise to over \$4 billion dollars as the fields are developed.²⁴ Beijing's China National Petroleum Corporation has signed an agreement to consider building a 2,500-mile pipeline to carry Kazakh Caspian oil across Kazakhstan to China's north-east. The Chinese need for oil has increased tenfold in the last eight years. A net importer since 1993, its domestic production is expected to begin declining in 2010.²⁵

China publicly supports the revival of the East-West Silk Road. An active participant in annual 'strategic partnership' summits with Russia and in the Shanghai Five forum, Beijing publicly and privately heralds and attempts to bolster the independence of the new Central Asian republics.

China is staking its own economic and political claims in Central Asia. Already, three of the five Central Asian republics have more trade with China than Russia.

China is carefully balancing its accumulating presence in Central Asia with improving relations with Russia while retaining its strategic relationship with Pakistan. China regards Pakistan as a hedge against India in the event the two nuclear-armed Asian giants drift toward ever-widening geopolitical competition in Asia in the decades ahead. The Chinese continue to be Pakistan's main weapons supplier; Beijing has furnished clandestine aid to Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme. China subscribed to the US-proposed UN Security Council sanctions against the Taliban but would be unlikely to support widening them to include Pakistan. As part of its balancing act, Beijing has also avoided support for the Taliban's domestic Afghan opponents, and recently signed a small assistance agreement with the Taliban to provide telephone equipment.²⁶

NARCO-TERRORISM: YET ANOTHER COMPLICATION

The Taliban, the ISI and Central Asian Muslim extremist movements, such as the IMU, operating from Afghanistan, are deeply involved in the export of opium from Afghanistan to Russia and Western Europe. The narcotics flowing out of Afghanistan fold naturally into the corrupt, criminalised economies in Central Asia and Russia. The drug trade rarely differentiates between Muslim extremist elements and non-religious elements. The Russian mafias, components of Russian border troops and Russia's 147th motorised division in Tajikistan, as well as large numbers of poverty-stricken Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz citizens, in and out of government, participate in this lucrative structure of vested interest which stretches back into Afghanistan to the Taliban, ISI and other parts of the joint venture. Bin Ladin's network relies on narco-trafficking profits to help operate the tentacles of his international terrorist operations.²⁷

Grassroots support for the IMU incursions into Central Asia have probably been based more on pursuing profits from the narcotics trade than with pro-Islamist sentiment. The IMU sallies into Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from Afghanistan in 2000 followed narcotics ratlines. The continued growth in the narco-extremist drug trade from Afghanistan - and the widening circle of those in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Russia reaping personal and institutional gains from it - constitute one more major impediment to an Afghan settlement.

REMEMBERING LESSONS LEARNED

The 'outer ring' geopolitical impediments to an Afghan political settlement are daunting, as the foregoing suggests. Yet, twenty years of attempts by first the Soviet Union and now Pakistan to establish their hegemony in Afghanistan have re-validated the historic futility of subjugating the independent-minded, xenophobic Afghans.

Three major, overlapping trends are undermining Pakistan's long-term ability to sustain its overreach in Afghanistan. The first is the increasing co-ordination among India, the United States and Russia to oppose Pakistan's Afghan strategy. The second is the Taliban's declining popularity in Afghanistan. Pakistan's deteriorating economy and social fabric constitutes a third trend eroding Islamabad's staying power inside Afghanistan.

The Musharraf regime confronts a dilemma. The more manpower and resources it squanders on its hopeless quest for hegemony in Afghanistan, the more it will exacerbate all three trends. Sooner or later, the correlation of international and domestic forces isolating and weakening Pakistan will take their toll forcing one of two general directions: an agonising reappraisal and shift in Pakistani policy on Afghanistan or a downswing into chaos and collapse inside Pakistan itself.

A window of opportunity for a political settlement in Afghanistan will open as Pakistan's interference recedes in Afghanistan. It would be a grave mistake for the US and its allies to blithely assume that Russia, Iran and India will, in deed as well as word, support an external consensus on ending the Afghan war through a broad-based Afghan political settlement process. Washington unproductively farmed out its Afghan diplomacy to Pakistan in the 1990s. American spokesmen earlier this year announced US backing for self-serving Iranian and Pakistani Afghan 'peace

initiatives'. Recent US rhetoric celebrating American collaboration with Russia on resolving the Afghan issue could backfire. For their own reasons, separately or in some combination, New Delhi, Moscow and Tehran may attempt to keep Pakistan submerged in its self-destructive Afghan quagmire at the expense of an Afghan settlement. Afghanistan would then face yet another inning as a football manipulated by outer ring major powers in pursuit of their individual strategic goals.

In formulating a fresh, more effective Afghan policy, the next American administration and US allies must keep their eye on the ball: restoring peace and stability at the centre of the Eurasian land mass. This, in turn, will require hard-headed analysis of the motives and actions of the other external powers involved, if there is to be genuine progress towards a lasting political settlement in Afghanistan.

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12 IRNA, Khorasan Province, 'Police Kill 30 Afghan Bandits in Six Months', 14 October 2000.

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14 *Ibid.*

15 Russian diplomats have utilised Russia's co-chair of the OSCE's Minsk Group to subtly thwart Armenian-Azeri compromise on the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

16 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 107.

17 Russian military and economic pressure on Moldova, including the retention of the Russian Fourteenth Army on Moldavian territory and Moscow's support for a separatist movement which has split Moldova, have combined to make Moldova a less enthusiastic participant in GUUAM.

18 The Azeri state-owned oil company joined US, Western European, Turkish, Japanese and Saudi oil corporations in signing (on 18 October in Tbilisi and 19 October in Ankara) an agreement to construct the Baku-Ceyhan MEP between 2002 and 2004. See Jamestown Foundation Report, 26 October 2000.

19 Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia*, New York University Press, New York, p. 193.

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23 Philip Andrews-Speed and Sergei Vingradov, 'China's Involvement in Central Asian Petroleum: Convergent or Divergent Interests', *Asian Survey*, Vol. XL, No. 2, March/April 2000, University of California Press, p. 384.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 389.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 387.

26 NNI, Islamabad, 'China to Assist Afghanistan in Communications Sector', 19 September 2000.

27 Sheehan, *op. cit.*, p. 3.