# Afghanistan 2014 & Beyond: Challenges & Implications for the Neighbours

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## Introduction

The Bonn Agreement of 2001 marked the beginning of a major phase in Afghanistan's history. Now once again Afghanistan is entering into a new and challenging phase. The end of 2014has finally pushed the process of security transition that began in 2010 with the departure of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan. The security transition has left the Afghanistan's National Security Forces (ANSF) trying its utmost to maintain and take responsibilities of the country's security. How this new phase will unfold for Afghanistan and the region is not yet clear because of the political and security uncertainties attached to the future stability of Afghanistan. The debate over ISAF's withdrawal process, and doubts about ANSF's limited capabilities to combat insurgents in future have not only caused irritation among the Afghan officials but also created a sense of fear in the minds of Afghans regarding their own survival.

A transitional stage in vital areas of high-profile nature has been set out. Afghanistan will be going through four notable transitions, with three of them being political, security, and economic transitions. As a result of these three crucial transitional changes, a fourth transition of humanitarian nature has also emerged combined with the shortage of international community's assistance to Afghans. All the four transitions are linked to each other. These are of utmost importance as they build pressure on the new Afghan government to keep the country from breaking up in addition to what it already inherited from 13 years of Karzai's legacy. The situation of Afghanistan will have irrepressible repercussions on the regional neighbours as well.

## Karzai's legacy: A shambolic inheritance

After 13 years in office, Hamid Karzai left Afghan presidency, bringing a sigh of relief at home and abroad. For the new president, Karzai leaves behind a series of positive, negative and controversial legacies as well as unattended matters. Karzai's legacy can be recorded in three phases. From 2001-2004 when

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Karzai was seen as a saviour and hero, from 2004-2009 when Karzai was viewed as a shrewd politician maximizing his own power, and from 2010-2014 when his presidency ended with an untidy electoral process.[(1)]

### From protagonist to partisan

Karzai was a partisan and a factional leader. He governed on the basis of divide and rule policies and narrow ethnic interests. He played one individual against the other and one ethnic group against the other for his power.[(2)] Karzai, himself a Pashtun, alienated the majority ethnic group of Pashtun and filled his government with other ethnic groups. The resentment felt by Pashtuns was exploited well by the Taliban.

### Reliance on traditional politics than modern

Karzai followed an inclusive approach of traditional tribal governance in contrast to the western democratic system. What Karzai understood of democracy was what his father, had Karzai, had practiced in Kandahar as the head of Popalzai tribe, a traditional ethnic based system that used jirga as a governing mechanism. Karzai mixed politics with prayers and relevant talk to keep himself informed of all large and small happenings and in return bestowed informers with favours and cash. Under the Bonn Agreement, the US gave many key roles to around 17 northern alliance warlords out of 30 cabinet members in return for their cooperation. So, Karzai never really trusted his government. However, such tribal governance set reliance on personality rather than on state institutions. In the process, the biggest flaw was that while relying personally on locals he got played and misled by many Taliban sympathizers as well. These very local networks convinced Karzai to restrain the US night raids, release prisoners and even replace local security commanders. The access to resources and position that Karzai has given to these local networks will have an enduring legacy in the form of patronage politics. Hence, Afghanistan remains a country stuck between modernity and tribalism.[(3)]

### A king maker

The centralized power structure that Karzai had created around himself made him look like a king-maker. For the past many years, Karzai had hand-picked individuals who not only flattered him but made him appear as a larger than life figure. He was surrounded by yes men or operators who otherwise lacked political base and were not consistent with their vision. Karzai's tolerance towards his opponents — even the corrupt and criminal ones –had in fact become a negative trait.[(4)]

### Weak state

Under Karzai, Afghanistan had a long time to introduce reforms and build a state structure but Karzai's biggest failure was his lack of visionary state policies. He did not lay down strong foundations for state institutions as he kept bypassing the government institutions for his centralized rule. This is evident from the latest political chaos resulting from the inept Independent Election

Commission of Afghanistan. The new president will immediately have to focus on state building.

### Corruption

While forming government under the Bonn Agreement, proficient Afghans were side-lined to give way to inefficient and unskilled ones who lacked good governing traits. Hence, the doors opened for incompetent and extensively corrupt governance that continued throughout Karzai's presidency.[5]

### Insecure Afghanistan

Today's Afghanistan remains as insecure and vulnerable to disintegration as it was the day when Karzai came into power. Although the Afghan army has showed a lot of courage in fighting the Taliban attacks, they are still ill-trained and ill-equipped considering the money and training that international trainers had committed to deliver. Afghan police remains corrupt and weak against Taliban coercion. On top of this, Karzai's praises for Taliban's fighting skills and his interest in incorporating the Taliban into the ANA created a lot of confusion for the ANA to either fight the Taliban as the country's enemy or refrain from attacking them. This confusion turned out to be advantageous for Taliban insurgents and a major setback for the ANA.[6]

### Weak economy

Karzai had no economic vision. All the grand projects and ideas of making Afghanistan an economic hub for the world were without a plan. For the first time in Afghan history, the international community was willing to invest millions but Karzai lost many opportunities by not investing rightly. He could not increase job opportunities for the people. Millions of dollars were spent in economic aid of Afghanistan but he left behind an economy dependent on foreign military expenditure and foreign aid just like it was when he took over the reins. Foreign assistance is likely to shrink as the drawdown comes to an end.

### Peace with the Taliban

Karzai did not follow a rightful strategy for peace with the Taliban. Peace requires neutrality in principle and action, yet Karzai's peace policy lacked such priority principles. A key reason was that Karzai had deep animosity for the Taliban and their regime from the very beginning as the latter had killed his father. Initially, Karzai showed support to the Taliban but with the intention to take back his family power. When Karzai's name emerged as a presidential choice, perhaps as a backup strategy, Karzai thought of persuading the Taliban for peace. Karzai hoped to gain more power among Pashtuns, met the Taliban delegation and Mullah Omar secretly and managed to strike a deal with the Taliban to join the new Afghan government. However, the US intervention ended up disrupting the whole understanding before the final deal could be made with the Taliban. Karzai could not broker more deals with the Taliban in future to bring them towards peace.[7] Later, instead of focusing on

peace negotiations he not only filled his government with people who fundamentally opposed the Taliban but also concentrated on securing more and more power for himself.

## Regional policy & Pakistan syndrome

Instead of forging a regional alliance to ensure Afghanistan's stability, Karzai created distance and a sense of competition among the neighbours, instigated hatred within region, especially towards Pakistan. His anti-Pakistan rhetoric, coupled with an incessant deepening of Indian influence, will continue to impact Pak-Afghan relations in future. Karzai's enmity for Pakistan emanates from the time he lived in the country during the Afghan jihad years, when the Taliban allegedly connected with the Pakistani intelligence, killed his father in Quetta. Moreover, when Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American of double portfolio, became an Ambassador and Bush's special representative to Afghanistan, he played a vital role in his brief time to align Karzai's interests with Bush in making Afghanistan look like a successful story. Khalilzad was the first official to publicly criticize Pakistan of harbouring the Taliban by taking the side of Karzai to make the country look admirable.[8] Later Karzai, backed by India, blamed Pakistan for harbouring the Taliban while he himself actively supported and harboured Pakistani Taliban leaders including Latifullah Mehsud and Fazlullah, an inconvenient truth which was later exposed by the US.[9] Besides with Pakistan, Karzai did little to develop closer ties with other neighbouring countries. Although in the last years of his rule, Karzai reached out for assistance from regional neighbours, yet it was too little and too late.

## Foreign policy & the US

By December 2001, the Taliban had been defeated and most of the old mujahideen leaders were either killed or discredited. Karzai by that time had become a trustful aide of the Americans because of his long established links with the US. Karzai's father, Abdul Ahad Karzai, a prominent tribal chief of Popalzai tribe in southern Kandahar, took refuge in the US along with his family when Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Karzai remained behind and joined the US-funded jihad against the Soviets in 1983 and organized money and weapons through the US embassy for tribal commanders. When the Taliban came into power, he began an anti-Taliban movement to overthrow them from his native Kandahar province. This made him look like a pragmatic political player who maintained good relations with the CIA.[10] Later the CIA also rescued him from the Taliban in southern Afghanistan and the US diplomats lobbied for his appointment as the rightful presidential candidate.[11] However, the celebratory start in the relationship came to a soured ending, beginning with the second term of Karzai in office. That the US was conceiving second options against Karzai was a personal blow for him. This started a new era of harsh relations between the two countries with Karzai infuriating the US by referring to the Taliban as his brothers at times.[12] Karzai even told the US officials that of the three enemies he faced, the US, the international community, and the Taliban, he would side first with the Taliban.[13] Karzai, however, felt betrayed not only by

the US for sidelining him but also by the Taliban. It was his suggestion initially to negotiate peace with the Taliban but both the US and the Taliban sidelined him in their secretive peace talks. Karzai criticized the US and the NATO forces for causing civilian casualties, but nevertheless decided to ignore the casualties caused by the Taliban in order to turn them against the US.

### A president in the shadow

To keep himself in a safe and politically active seat, he has built a secure residence within Arg palace's vicinity to reside in. This way he remains a shadow power player. Moreover, the complex system based on power brokers and tribal interest groups that Karzai has built will make the new president heavily dependent on him in order to run the administration smoothly.[(14)]

In conclusion, the good work that Karzai did is little but needs mentioning. Karzai managed to ratify the Afghan constitution even without proper implementation; educated young urbanites got connected to the world; there was greater freedom of expression through more than 89 television channels, 220 radio stations and 600 newspapers active around the country.[(15)] However, his successor will have to deal with the future crisis besides handling his inheritance of so many ills with great skill and arguably, much difficulty.

## An assessment of Afghanistan's current situation

### Political transition & challenges ahead

*Election 2014*

Afghanistan embraced a new era in its political history by conducting a successful democratic presidential election held on 5th April 2014. The country witnessed a strong belief in the continuation of democratic process and antipathy against insurgency when over 7 million enthusiastic voter turnout was reported despite security threats in the first round of the electoral process. Although the turnout was high with around 57% of eligible voters participating in Afghanistan's first democratic transfer of power, the contestants could not receive an absolute majority of votes. The two top contenders, Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Dr. Abdullah Abdullahhad to go through a second round of runoff in accordance with the Election Law of Afghanistan.[(16)]

The second round of elections held on 14 June 2014 saw less enthusiasm than the first one, as it was spoiled by security threats and attacks by the Taliban. The second round was also a clear portrayal of the ethnic polarization of Afghan society, especially between the two prominent communities who voted for their candidate i.e. Pashtuns for Ashraf Ghani and Tajiks for Abdullah. Moreover, the release of the runoff result led the country into a stalled state while both the communities resorted to inflicting ethnic based venom on each other.[(17)]

The stark difference between the results of the two rounds was bound to create chaos. Abdullah had received 45 percent of the votes in the first round of elections but in the second round he received 43 percent. Ghani's percentage of votes leaped from 31 percent in the first round to 56 percent in the second

round. Besides this, the total voter turnout jumped from seven to eight million from the first to the second round, despite less voter turnout during the runoff.[18] An approximate gap of one million votes was needed to swing the electoral results in favour of Ashraf Ghani, that Abdullah alleged was done by IEC through filling ballot boxes in favour of his opponent to make him a presidential winner.[19] Hence, both sides with their supporters blamed each other of using illicit means to gain power. This encouraged the Taliban to make a mockery of the democratic system; weaken Afghan security force's morale; and create doubts among Afghans about the legitimacy of political institutions.[20]

### *The Unity Government: A diplomatic achievement or challenge?*

The politically stagnant country after five months of electoral feud was rescued by the mediatory role of the US, played along with the support of the international community. US Secretary of State John Kerry brokered a power-sharing deal to resolve the political deadlock that allowed both the presidential candidates a part in the future government in the form of the National Unity Government. Once the final results of the full audit of votes undertaken by the international community were announced, a deal was proposed to the losing candidate, and he was offered the influential position of the newly created Chief Executive Officer (CEO) with significant powers similar to an executive prime minister of the government in the new Unity Government. The president will have more powers as granted by the Afghan constitution, the chief executive while reporting to the president will be handling the daily affairs of the government. As an effort to keep the Unity Government intact, the US and international supporters attached a precondition of a democratic transfer of power for the continuation of international aid.[21]

The Afghan elections, which were meant to showcase Afghanistan's political and democratic maturity to the world, proved to be stuck in an ethnic debacle with political elites weighing their own self-interests and greed even at this crucial turning point for their country. The supporters of each side kept debating whether Ghani will be exercising more power or Abdullah will be acting as an equal partner. The debate ended with great reluctance after a series of negotiations with John Kerry. Therefore, once Abdullah agreed to the formation of a Unity Government, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah were sworn in as the President and the Chief Executive Officer, respectively, in a ceremony on 29 September 2014.[22]

Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah as former cabinet members in the Karzai administration had strained co-working relations then. Even now, it will take them a few initial months to adjust to the new office and governance. It is too early to rate the success of the Unity Government and whether it is a short-term diplomatic achievement or a failure in the long term. The complexity of the division of powers laid out in the agreement, not stated in Afghanistan's Constitution, demands much agreeability from the new governmental heads and stands out as a matter of immediate concern. The Unity Government is more of a fabricated structure rather than a union. The deal has created a Council of Ministers to be headed by the Chief Executive, including two deputies and all

cabinet ministers. Besides this, there will be another cabinet, constitutionally headed by the president and also consisting of ministers. According to the deal, "the CEO will be responsible for managing the cabinet's implementation of government policies, and will report on progress to the president directly and in the cabinet." The complexity of making the unity deal work becomes further complicated under another clause that calls for "parity in the selection of personnel between the president and the CEO at the level of head of key security and economic institutions, and independent directorates."[23]

The debatable question is what would happen if conflict of interest and personalized choices turn out to be points of contention between the two power heads, or when the strategic functions clash with the daily functions that come under the strategic areas? This will include decisions regarding Defence, Finance, Intelligence, Commerce, Independent Directorate of Local Governance, all of which are not excluded from home affairs or the management of daily concerns. The only indication for the resolution of conflict is suggested under another clause for the president and the CEO, in which collaborative and harmonious terms of partnership are emphasized at a personal level in order to make the Unity Government work effectively.[24]

How this will be achieved has not been mentioned. The only plausible solution will lie in reasoning and maturity of both the heads to keep the country stable by calming down the edgy ethnic faultlines between the North and the Southeast regions of the state. The Taliban had already capitalized on ethnic lines by propagating that the election was imposed and engineered by foreigners. Infact the ethnic divide in Afghanistan appeared so clear on the surface that the new government for Ashraf Ghani faces greater incentive to remain necessarily intact for the sake of future stability. Under Karzai, it was the Pashtuns who felt resentment towards the state whereas in the current post-election scenario such is the situation of the Afghan minority groups.

### *Reforms & parliamentary elections next inline*

The top challenge for the new Unity Government is unity itself. Ashraf Ghani, a President with his hands tied to power-sharing string, will have to bring political and electoral reforms as an urgent task before the next year's parliamentary polls. There is a strong need to dismantle kleptocracy and define policy and reforms aiming at establishing long-term democratic foundations and good governance.

Afghanistan has become the world's most sophisticated kleptocracy and the world's most corrupt government in-line with North Korea and Somalia, according to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.[25] The Afghans have started raising their voices against the high level of corruption – and this remains one of the key factors keeping their country off beam. Foreign countries seeking business in Afghanistan often end up leaving due to desperate corruption demands at the top level. Moreover, much of the budget aided by international community is spent on government officials' payments and protocol due to the large size of the cabinet and ministry officials hand-picked or accommodated by top heads. The political reforms should carefully follow

reduction in cabinet and ministerial appointees' numbers who indulge in easy corruption and abuse their political office. This would ensure less economic burden and more investment in the much needed development sector as well as in the security forces.[26]

Next year's parliamentary elections would not be an easy task. While the global world is absorbed in talking about the presidential contest, local discussions have begun on the provincial elections that would be held simultaneously and that will set the stage for the parliamentary elections of 2015. These elections are important because they actually connect the local communities with the national government through their representatives.

The country would again undergo deep demographic changes with possibilities of political actors repositioning themselves and rebuilding alliances to preserve their own powers on the basis of patronage networks. Even if by any chance the 2015 elections manage to be transparent, it is most likely that political upheaval would still take place. The elites and power brokers start competing for their share in the government and at times re-arrange their patronage networks. The central government often ends up negotiating with them to fulfil earlier pledges made for key posts. For example, after the 2009 re-election of Karzai, the parliament nullified most of his chosen candidates for ministerial positions that followed an uncertain period of political chaos. Similarly, in the Unity Government, allocation of ministerial posts and provincial posts might end up creating tensions among various political groups from both Ghani and Abdullah supporters.[27]

However, gauging from the recent post-electoral developments, elections in 2015 would most likely undergo similar manipulative and fraud disturbance generated by instrumental mechanism of networks. Political contenders in Afghanistan still rely on local power brokers, possibly because elections are only a means of transferring power for them and they still lack an understanding of the correlation between democracy, political liberalization and stability. Perhaps democracy is not the primary priority in comparison to security. For every election held whether presidential or provincial, western officials have been more concerned about the level of corruption while Afghans in general have been focused on the outcome of the elections.

Interestingly, the demographic changes that Afghans went through in the past decade have given rise to young and educated section in society. They demand transparent and accountable role of the political system. President Ghani with an academic background can bring a positive change in the stereotypical political system of the country by reaching out to this generation of educated people. Many young Afghans are already actively mobilizing on future reforms and transparency.

Afghanistan's political history has proven that any attempt at rapid political liberalization brings out adverse results, so instead of expecting a rapid change, priority should be drawn out for the rightful areas wherein change can be brought. Meaningful reforms can be generated if an approach of prioritizing the electoral process is done. Instead of taking an approach of quick fixes, like that of the Unity Government, which primarily brings media limelight and little

change, more meaningful reforms can be consolidated to allow for a participatory and stable system. So far the elections of 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2014 held in Afghanistan under the democratic banner have all been plagued with fraud and corruption. And each time, this plague establishes a sense of disappointment and inequity among Afghans who feel disgraced as voters, and manipulated at the hands of political elites. Afghanistan is a young democratic country still experimenting with the idea of democracy, and the culture of monetary manipulative traits is embedded in its society. The establishment of an accountability mechanism would go a long way in bringing about gradual change from the grassroots level.[28]

## Security transition: A rocky jump ahead

### *Bilateral security agreement & status of forces agreement*

In what was the very first task after the formation of the new government, Afghanistan signed the long-delayed Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US and Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the NATO respectively, both of which allow a limited number of American troops to stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014.[29] For the Afghan government, national sovereignty was contingent on a strategic partnership decision for their future security of their homeland as authorized by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution. Consequently, a pact was signed between Afghan National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar and US Ambassador James Cunningham and a similar pact between the Afghan advisor and a NATO representative.[30]

The BSA was enforced from 1 January 2015 until the end of 2024 and beyond, except if it gets terminated by either side with a two-year notification. The pact provides a legal framework for 9,800 US troops, as announced by President Obama, to stay in Afghanistan with the drawdown pattern of a rapid decrease into halves at the end of 2015. It would then further reduce to a token number of less than 1,000 forces by the end of 2016 to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF),[31] with funding of up to $8 billion annually in military assistance for the next three years.[32] The security agreement SOFA signed with NATO the same day would have 4,000-5,000 additional troops mainly from Britain, Germany, Italy and Turkey to stay in post-2014 Afghanistan in a non-combative role. The NATO mission known as “Resolute Support” also started from 1 January 2015. The NATO countries would stay through 2017 to finance ANSF and strengthen political and institutional partnership with the country. Hence, the total number of foreign soldiers staying would be up to 14,800.[33]

One big concern in everyone’s mind is regarding the capabilities of Afghan National Security forces (ANSF) to keep their country and its people free from insurgent threats and the final drawdown plan announced by Washington. With the beginning of2015, around 350,000 poorly-equipped Afghan forces took over the fight with the Taliban and this will serve as a test of the real capacity and fighting skills of Afghan forces. The challenge for the American and NATO forces left behind is to succeed in helping Afghan security forces to keep the country from falling into the Taliban’s hands once again.

Therefore, the final drawdown pattern and the number of troops suggested by President Obama could end up in a disaster for everyone. Realistically the fear of Afghanistan turning into another Iraq nightmare due to the US drawdown plan is a natural one. Ahmed Rashid, a renowned journalist, has famously described the rapid withdrawal strategy as "catastrophically wrong" and has envisaged that it could only lead Afghanistan into a civil war, especially with the rise of other extremist groups such as the ISIS in Iraq and Syria.[34]

The new Unity Government remains fragile, and the ANSF barely able to secure their bases from the Taliban on their own. Given the magnitude of problems in Afghanistan, the limited number of troops staying behind, pales in comparison to the enormous fully-equipped presence of international forces in the country for the past decade. If the fear of an impending civil war brings out more efficient capabilities among the Afghan forces to learn, fight and secure, would the ANSF still be sufficient and sustainable beyond 2017? This question leaves the future uncertain.

Moreover, another key challenge for the ANA to tackle in the future would be the imbalanced ethnic composition within its ranks. The main problem appears in the southern Pashtun region where fighting is fierce, and there is less Pashtun representation in the armed forces. If the capabilities of the ANA work well, as planned in future, there are serious risks of ANA's fragmentation or structural collapse on the basis of ethnic, sectarian, tribal and domestic regional patronage and differences. Next to this there are fears of politicization of the ANA due to the presence of warlords or certain political interference in the affairs of the ANA. So keeping the ANA apolitical and neutral under any state of affairs needs considerate work.[35]

The security pact permits – in writing – the US troops to conduct combat operations in Afghanistan. The NATO assistance mission led by the US will, on the other hand, be excluded from the combat support and will focus on training.[36]The combat operational strategy allows the US to retain bases at about nine separate locations across Afghanistan other than the embarkation and debarkation facility areas for the unloading of troops, equipment and supplies from shipment and aircrafts take place.[37]

The agreed airbases and areas provided by Afghanistan for the use and access of the US Forces are the Kabul Airbase, Bagram Airbase in the East, Mazar-i-Sharif in the North, Shindand in the West, Herat in the west near Iranian border, Kandahar and Shorab (Helmand) in the South, Gardez and Jalalabad in the East, a key gateway to Pakistan and a base for drones. Besides these, other facilities and areas at other locations would be provided to the US forces once authorized by the Defense Ministry. The land ports agreed under the agreement includes Torkham in the Nangarhar province; Spin Boldak in Kandahar province; Torghundi in Herat province; Hairatan in Balkh province; and Sher Khan Bandar in Kunduz province.[38]

However, the combat strategy raises certain challenging concerns regarding the role that the Afghan security forces are going to play with the assistance of foreign troops. From the preamble passages of the pre-decisional

BSA document of 2013 till its end, a major point of concern is the use of terms such as "combat operations" or "combat terrorism" in order to free Afghanistan from al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The document basically allows for the continuity of combat operations and states clearly that, "unless otherwise mutually agreed, the US forces shall not conduct combat operations in Afghanistan."[39] As also mentioned by President Obama, troop reduction would pursue twin objectives, i.e. the training of Afghan forces and the conduct of counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda.[40] Lately, US officials also confirmed of approving combat operations on Pentagon's request in Afghanistan, through the use of ground forces, manned aircraft and drones beyond 2014. These operations would be conducted in three situations: against al-Qaeda and other "transnational" terrorist groups; for the protection of US forces involved in training or other activities; and for the assistance of Afghan forces.[41]

The issue of concern is how the drawdown timeline will play up against Afghanistan's predicted descent scuffle. Owing to the political debacle of the last few months, any chance of revising the security pact seems lost. Growing internal security pressures, Taliban resurgence in some areas arising from indecisive electoral results along with the international community's patience running out led to a hasty signing of security agreements as a solution to Afghan anxieties. This can turn out to be a good decision but the future disposition of Afghans towards foreign troops operating under BSA could potentially also turn hostile. Time is precarious as well as uncertainties that come with it. Some immediate concerns may as well stem from the highly controversial combat operations strategy in the future.

The only clarification regarding the future implementation of the combat operations that President Ghani made in his speech was that the BSA will not permit the use or deployment of chemical and nuclear weapons in Afghanistan. Moreover, foreign forces were not to be allowed to enter mosques and other holy places across the country.[42] The newly appointed heads did not address the issue of resentment felt by Afghans towards foreign troops' policy of searching homes in the past. Objections were at the way foreign forces used to break in Afghan doors at night to carryout raids against self-suspected insurgents. These raids many times turned out to be against innocent civilians inspected of being insurgents due to wrong intelligence information. The issue became a contentious point between former President Karzai and the US officials, leading to the refusal of signing the BSA as Karzai wanted to ban the night raids in future counterterrorism operations. Moreover, Washington has not given clear specifications as to the scope and nature of the counterterrorism operations that would be carried out in partnership with the Afghan forces. Even though the language of the agreement has been tailored to put the Afghan forces at the frontlines of counterterrorism raids, the assistance of US troops involving a commando element remains evident.

A second point of contention that might appear in the future is about the immunity favour granted to American soldiers. The agreement in writing exclusively prevents the US military personnel from being prosecuted under

Afghan laws for any criminal or civilian misconduct they commit in Afghanistan. In fact, the UShaskept the jurisdiction over the criminal proceedings or actions involving its troops in the country to itself. The provision, however, excludes US civilian contractors as Afghanistan gets jurisdiction over US contractors and their employees. If the new Unity Government had not acceded to this provision, Washington might have backed down on signing the BSA like it did in Iraq when the government refused to give the US troops immunity, leading to an end of US presence in the country.(43)

A third concern that can either inflame or calm down the future regional environment of suspicion and animosity would be regarding the use of force outside Afghanistan in the name of self-defence. President Ghani, after signing the security pact, declared that the right to use force would be exercised by the Afghan government and the air space will be controlled by the Afghans themselves.(44) Through a televised speech, Ghani for now did assure the dignitaries and the world that the BSA would not infringe any country's sovereignty and laws and also the presence of foreign troops would not threaten neighbouring countries. Ghani pointed out that the agreement was in the Afghan national interest and that it could be amended if it is needed and in the interest of concerning parties.(45)

A key question over here concerns the parameters of national interest on the basis of which the use of force will be conducted. While the BSA is not a defence pact that commits the US to defend Afghanistan in case of attack or any external aggression, the concern that perturbs regional minds follows from the script that Washington "shall regard with grave concern any external aggression or threat of external aggression" and that Washington and Kabul would work together to develop "an appropriate response," including considering political, military, and economic measures.(46)Hence, the nature of that appropriate response defined by the Afghan national interest in response to self-perceived threat may not correspond with the perception of the neighbouring countries. How far the US would agree to defend Afghanistan against external threats, without aggravating the regional tensions is yet another question mark.

A fourth concern in the minds of both Afghans and the regional neighbours is regarding the US interests to maintain its military bases in Afghanistan. Will the US maintain its bases permanently or just until the final withdrawal time? Last year in May, former President Karzai stated that Washington desired to have nine bases in Afghanistan, which would in turn be accepted by the Afghan government. Even though the US officials repeatedly insist that they don't seek permanent bases in Afghanistan, the BSA authorizes the US to maintain existing bases and build new facilities as agreed by both sides.(47)

Whatever the decision the US makes will have an impact on the regional neighbours of Afghanistan. Already the US presence in facilities is located strategically where it can keep an eye on the rest of the region. A notable number of US bases mushroomed all over Afghanistan agitates the neighbouring countries about the US intentions behind counterterrorism assistance. Hence, both long-term presence or a limited one will remain a cause of concern. Even

local Afghans have been expressing mixed feelings about the continuing American presence in their country. Due to the threat of Taliban violence, it is one thing for Afghans to feel no choice but to tolerate the presence of foreigners as protectors and trainers to their security forces and giving confidence to foreign donors to keep investing in their country; but another to give them long term presence, which, arguably would be intolerable to most Afghans.

### *Taliban: Battle between resurgence & negotiations*

To make the security transition a success, it was a smart act by President Ghani during his inaugural speech to invite the Taliban and other militant groups, such as Hezb-e-Islami, to embrace peace and become a part of political process by renouncing arms. Ghani Ahmadzai expressed openness to listen to the grievances of the insurgents in order to find a possible workable solution. But that same open invitation excluded the Taliban leader Mullah Omar who is on the UN's terrorist watch list.[48] President Ghani's policy of cautious engagement with insurgents in peace and political talks is a shift from what his predecessor had been trying to achieve. Former President Karzai had become so much accommodating towards the Taliban and other insurgent groups that on many occasions he called the Taliban his 'brothers' and publicly invited Mullah Omar for joining the political setup of Afghanistan by renouncing violence.[49] So the Afghan peace process inherited by the new government has practically reached nowhere and as in the past, the Afghan Taliban have persistently rejected indulging into proposed peace talks. Therefore, to make the new peace strategy workable, a clear understanding of Afghan interests and that of the insurgent actors will have to be defined. Peace in Afghanistan is very much dependent on the way future political policy-making and security situation develop in Afghanistan.

The failure to come up with a clear successor to Karzai in Afghanistan following an electoral debacle stalled the law and order situation allowing the Taliban influence to spread in a number of populated areas. Many areas were either partially or fully recaptured by the Taliban. Key factors contributing to the Taliban's territorial gains other than the intensified tensions between the electoral candidates were the access of the Taliban to additional weaponry; flaws in Afghan Local Police (ALP) control, with so poor training that they mostly felt no choice but to surrender or change sides with Taliban; and finally a grey area of support from the disillusioned local populace.[50]

The Taliban's timely summer operation was not only launched in the districts that had their influence but also in areas where they had marginal influential presence, like in the north of Afghanistan. They took control of areas that were under ANSF control and at present the ANSF is carrying out large-scale operations to clear insurgents from the once secured areas. This deterioration of security had affected the second round of elections badly. Local power brokers in particular with their own militias also played the Taliban resurgence and electoral debacle to their advantage. They supported and facilitated the Taliban so they could gain advantage of positions in the next government.[51]

The convergence of interests between the power brokers and the Taliban or other militant groups gravely disrupts the peace process. Similarly, it can be anticipated that the period of 2015 will see more bloodshed in Afghanistan with the Taliban testing their strength against the ANSF –unless two future developments emerge to strike the Taliban, i.e. if a strong responsible Afghan government that enjoys greater legitimacy emerges; and if the ANSF convinces Taliban of its stronger capabilities of controlling the devastated situation. Consequently for now, the Unity Government can explore a carrots and sticks approach based on a combination of pursuance and openness along with a weakening insurgent morale that would force them to relinquish violence.

For the peace plan to meet its goals, a comprehensive and clear policy needs to be outlined that would bring all government officials and people on the same page. Even officials like Abdullah Abdullah as a CEO would have to opt for a more flexible and supportive approach towards the Taliban. Abdullah and his party supporters had always remained stern towards the Taliban. Karzai's envisioned 'Peace Process Road Map to 2015' offered prestigious positions in Afghan Cabinet and posts like provincial governorships to the Taliban that was unacceptable to ethnic minorities. Even during his electoral campaign, Abdullah's stance on dealing with the Taliban was to keep the negotiation door open as desired by the Afghans but not to compromise on pleasing the small number of insurgents as well.[52] The focus should be based on pleasing the insurgents or understanding their primary point of contentions to take the peace process ahead. In the words of President Ghani: "We want to say, clearly, to all political opponents, that war is not the solution for Afghan problems. An Afghan-led peace is the only way and political opposition must be transformed to a political process."[53]

Perhaps some reforms accommodating Taliban interests in the interest of peace might workout effectively for all the parties. Another proposed solution for resolving tensions could be to involve a group of insurgents, along with other groups of women and ethnic groups, in a political process that would form an appropriate reconciliatory agreement between the government and the Taliban. If a unity group incorporating all Afghan ethnic representatives based on democratic political ideals negotiates with the Taliban for the reconciliation, it would not only weaken the Taliban position but also ensure a greater guarantee of preserving wider gains for Afghanistan. This would leave the Taliban with the option of reintegrating into the political setup of present day Afghanistan that is supported by the Afghan populace.

Furthermore, the past decade of conflict in Afghanistan has replaced ideology with money and vengeance. The suppression of resources by the international community has transformed the Taliban into a loose network, a kind of profit-driven franchise aspiring financial gains through any means available. The Taliban profited financially from insecurity and recruited economically stagnated members of the society. Major sources of Taliban funding can be targeted to weaken the Taliban. Some sources include poppy growth and drug trade, protection money charged to international and government contracts, Islamic taxes like Zakat and Ushr and other extortion

taxes from local businesses based in parts of their control.[54] Afghan government can convince the international world to permit license for legalizing opium cultivation for pharmaceutical usage; that would not only hamper insurgency funds but also economically stabilize the country.

At present, the US-Taliban rounds of negotiations remain cancelled with no visible progress at the Afghan-Taliban side as well. Like the Doha talks, a secret deal with Karzai most likely was a ploy to stretch out time to acquire international recognition and strength to takeout the remaining foreign troops left at the end of 2014. Since the US was prepared to pullout, it has intensified air combat operations in Afghanistan. The latest pentagon statistics showed that the US dropped more bombs on the Taliban and other insurgents in the recent months than ever in the last two years. Perhaps it's a move to overthrow the Taliban and their recent gains scored due to post-electoral political vacuum. After the drawdown, air operations would be higher than the strikes from bases. The reliance on air strikes than ground troops might also be an indication of the next phase of the war ahead in the post-2014 scenario.[55]

To surpass the civil breakdown of Afghanistan, the Afghan government would have to balance engaging the Taliban with continuing the fight against them, with or without Pakistan and with or without the US assistance. For starters, the government in Kabul can revisit reconciliatory policy issues by lifting up the ban imposed by Karzai on the two-track meetings between the Taliban representatives and unofficial Afghan groups with the help of the UN or whichever mediator considered suitable to the Afghans.[56]

## Economic transition

Apart from managing security needs, the biggest challenge facing Afghanistan is the economic transition. Six months of uncertainty over the Afghan election and the drama associated with every round left the weak economy more shattered. It was an economy at the mercy of foreign aid with the government struggling to raise enough revenue through taxes and custom duties.

The current financial situation of Afghanistan is an eye opener. Just two days before the swearing in presidential ceremony, the Afghan finance ministry informed of delaying the salaries to hundreds of thousands of civil servants in October because of insufficient funds. Salaries were only paid to the Afghan military and police as it came from a separate fund. Afghanistan's treasury had less than 6.5 billion Afghanis ($116 million) only. Already more than two-thirds of Afghanistan's budget is funded by foreign donors. Having no choice, the US was asked for emergency funding of about $537 million to meet the country's budget commitment till December 2014.[57]

US Ambassador to Afghanistan James Cunningham responded that additional funds would only be borrowed from donor pledges post-2014, until then the new government would have to cut its spending and raise revenue.[58] The ambassador's tone spoke business, a reminder of how the future relationship would be between Washington and Kabul – unlike the past decade when the US threw uncountable money but received complaints from Karzai.

In essence, Afghanistan's economy had been based on four economies i) the aid economy driven by NGOs, USAID and the Commander's Emergency Response Programme (CERP) funding; ii) the war contracting economy, driven by immense expenditures on private security and military transportation and construction; iii) the narcotics economy centred in the south; and iv) the real Afghan economy, which has been the smallest one among the four. The largest first and second of the mentioned economies has shrunk significantly since the end of 2014 and might disappear speedily thereafter.[59]

According to the World Bank assessments, the GDP growth rate slowed from 14.4 percent in 2012 to only 4.2 percent in 2013. Afghan economy remains just at $20.72 billion, one of the poorest in the world.[60] It is estimated that once the drawdown will begin, the Afghan currency will also tumble. The agricultural production declined in 2013, even though opium production thrived and will expectedly continue to thrive beyond 2014. With the departure of foreign forces and western organizations, tens and thousands of Afghan labours like cooks, drivers, translators, cultural advisors, local liaisons would be left with huge unemployment crisis. In many cases, a single income is estimated to support more than five members of families. The lack of employment opportunities with no secure future insight has already compelled the educated lot of the Afghan populace to find employments abroad.

Due to political and security uncertainties, there is a lack of business confidence as far as international investors are concerned. The regional and international projects like oil pipelines remain suspended. Infact the famously conferred Aynak Copper mine to Chinese investors had to pull out its workers due to Taliban threats.[61] Grand economic projects propagated by Karzai to get investor's attraction remained flawed due to insufficient security arrangements and lack of visionary tangible groundwork. Karzai assumed that the international community would keep on pouring millions of dollars in foreign aid to Afghanistan, but it seems aid and accountability will go together in future.

Hence, there is much pressure on Ghani and Abdullah to save their country by not only gaining the international community's confidence, but also investor's interest abroad and in the region as well. The world and Afghans at home are hoping with high expectations that a former World Bank president with global connections, a technocrat, a former finance minister in the Karzai administration with economic development ideas, may set things right to save Afghanistan from falling into another episode of chaos.

During the short span of time as a finance minister in the Karzai administration, Ghani had worked on reforms and introduced several notable public investment programmes like the National Solidarity Programme, issued centralized revenue policies, formulated an economic development strategy known as National Development Framework (NDF) based on the needs of economic development and poverty reduction. It was also presented to donor countries at the Berlin Conference held in 2004 as a seven-year plan called Securing Afghanistan's Future.[62]

During his campaign, Ghani talked of taking strict actions against corruption. He focused on development projects like the construction of Kajaki

hydroelectric power dam, finding market for cotton produced in the country, infrastructure and mines development.[63] While introducing economic reforms, the priority areas for the new government should be to direct Afghan desired projects and development programmes. For the past decade the international community had invested billions of dollars to build economic infrastructure of Afghanistan but achieved less as it was based on their interests and choices rather than on Afghan needs.

The aid hunger also resulted in the collapse of the country's central bank known as Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) in 2010, which had to be transferred from finance ministry to an independent institution status.[64] Ghani would have to choose honest and committed specialists for the right fields in order to benefit from their expertise. A need to create new employment opportunities in the country is essential so that the energetic educated class of Afghans working abroad can return home to contribute in building their country.

Afghanistan needs a basic fiscal policy structure that would outline its short-, medium- and long-term expenditures and revenue objectives to aggregate demand and GDP fluctuations in the economy. An economy centred on trade than aid would have less burden on weak economic structure of Afghanistan. A kind of barter trade can also be introduced by the Afghan government where international community can benefit from Afghanistan's numerous unexplored natural resources like oil, lithium, iron, copper and geographical resources like land, water, climate in exchange for Afghan skills. That would be a way to keep the international aid and trade commitments going on.

For now, the traditional Afghan donors like the European Union (EU), the US and Japan have committed to continue their support to Afghanistan beyond 2014. But their future aid would clearly be based on government's performance and corruption check.[65] For instance, the Tokyo conference on Afghanistan held in July 2012 as a follow up to the Bonn Agreement of 2011,was attended by the Afghan government and international participants such as the US, the UK, Germany and Japan to offer funds. The participants affirmed to support Afghanistan throughout the 'Transition to the Transformation Decade' from 2015 to 2024.[66] But a series of strict conditions were attached to the US$16 billion aid. These conditions range from anti-corruption measures to good governance such as countering narcotics, improving justice and human rights, improved banking, fighting money laundering and terrorist financing, tax collection, raising tax revenues as a portion of GDP to 15 percent by 2016 and 19 percent by 2025 from the present 11 per cent, reintegration of Afghan refugees as a crucial effort to the contribution of security and stability of the country.[67]

While international pledges remain vital, Afghanistan will find economic roads within the region more sustainable by utilizing its geographic location in larger Asia. Afghanistan should start afresh by bringing a shift in its regional policies, as discussed under the 'Heart of Asia' Conference held on 14 June 2012 in Kabul. It was a follow-up from a high-level Ministerial meeting of the 'Istanbul Process'. The process centers on Afghanistan and provides engagement on result-oriented regional cooperation through connecting

Afghanistan with its near and extended neighbours.[68] There are so many vast opportunities available for Afghanistan and its regional neighbouring countries to be explored and exploited for developing an economic friendly block. All the countries can offer and gain from each country's expertise, resources and markets. Yesterday's geographic liability with visionary economic policies can contribute to the future economic stability of Afghanistan.

### Humanitarian transition

While looking at the three primary transitions that Afghanistan is going through, the consequential effects of all three would be on its humanitarian sector. The issue of humanitarian transitional crisis has not received sufficient attention within and outside Afghanistan. A noteworthy number of Afghan citizens are already displaced within Afghanistan due to rising civilian casualties and the spread of insurgent activities across the country. It is presumed that the elected government would also have less capacity to deliver the needs and the security of humanitarian emergency. Furthermore, the commitment of international community and independent organizations has also reduced when it comes to future humanitarian support and protection in Afghanistan. In this backdrop, sustainable solutions for the millions of already displaced Afghans will remain obscure and displacement would grow in number. Since doubts about the capability of Afghan security forces linger on Afghans' mind, they feel determined to stay in the neighbouring countries, like in Pakistan especially. The acceleration of Afghan refugees has already begun since 2013. Individuals associated with ISAF or supportive of government also become targets of insurgent attacks. For their security a number of ISAF mission countries have provided immigration schemes for their Afghan staff. Also an increasing number of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan and Iran are heading for western countries by seeking asylum. Hence, in the coming years there will be a mix of displaced populace including internally displaced person's (IDPs), refugees, asylum seekers.[69]

Even in situations where cities and districts fall to insurgents, a large bulk of Afghans who support the Afghan government are either left at the mercy of Taliban insurgents or have to move to other secure areas within Afghanistan. Internal displacement for the past many years has become a common survival strategy for Afghans to escape localized violence. But even within the country, these internal migrants go through difficult conditions where they have inadequate food and shelter facilities. The disastrous nature of humanitarian crisis has very serious uncontrolled ramifications for Afghanistan's neighbours especially Pakistan.[70] It is a national responsibility of the Afghanistan government to formulate laws and policies for the protection and responsibility of its citizens both within and outside, instead of expecting the neighbours to keep burdening their economy for a lengthy facilitation process of Afghan refugees. So far, however, no concrete steps are being taken by the Afghan government.

## Future scenarios in view of the transitional picture

Afghanistan's transitional picture presents a number of future scenarios for the regional policymakers to plan ahead and be prepared for in the limited time available. Although the future situation cannot be predicted accurately because of the complexities attached to Afghanistan and the insurgents' unpredictable moves, certain images do appear in the minds of policymakers; and with each future scenario, regional and international countries will have different implications and policies to respond with. These images include civil war and a coup like situation in the worst case scenario and a gradual path to stability in the best scenario.

Debate over possible post-2014 scenarios is important. Khalid Chandio predicts that the post-2014 Afghanistan could have four scenarios: a maintenance of the status-quo with limited foreign military involvement for the system to survive; a Taliban victory and the disintegration of the ANA resulting in fierce attacks on foreign troops; the emergence of a "New Deal" where all the tribes of Afghanistan will build a consensus on having one Afghanistan including the Taliban or Pashtun, and lastly the eruption of a civil war similar to the post-Soviet chaos in 1988 and subsequent breakdown of government and order.(71)

Another analyst, Jaïr van der Lijn, predicts some scenarios of which a significant few are: Afghanistan will be divided into Northern and Southern blocs, with foreign troops leaving for good. The Northern bloc will come under the control of northern alliance rallied behind a weak Pashtun presidential support, whereas dissatisfied Pashtuns due to growing insecurity in South will surrender to the Taliban. The country will end up having a fierce tug of war between the two blocs throughout 2015 and beyond.(72)

In another scenario, a security transition from the ISAF to the ANSF will succeed as planned but the ANSF will lose more terrain in the rural areas initially. Karzai will manoeuvre another Pashtun to succeed him through elections while Karzai himself will remain active in the background. The new government would be a continuation of the old one, as corrupt as before. The flow of international donor aid and assistance may not be as sufficient as that committed at the Tokyo conference, except for the funding of security forces. Taliban and other militant organizations will be weaker and fragmented while the insurgency becomes more local. Local power brokers with right connections in the power centre of Kabul will dominate locally. By 2017, the ANSF will be better trained with sufficient capacity to operate independently in a majority of areas but still weak to control the country as a whole. Unemployment due to severing economic conditions will put intense social and economic pressures on the political system.(73)

In the third scenario, Afghanistan's economy would deteriorate, as foreign donors would be less generous than what they had committed in Tokyo conference by blaming Kabul for not fulfilling the conditions agreed upon. Karzai's presence would create mistrust towards the government and he would be seen as a symbol of corruption, directly and indirectly clinging onto power. The Taliban under the traditional Quetta Shura would become more fragmented

than ever, fighting over leadership and Mullah Omar losing control of its commandership. Many new power brokers will emerge and fight over their share of the pie. Old and new warlords will control their own militias and fiefdoms and continuously fight over resources, drug and power. The remaining educated and rich class will also flee and Afghanistan will be left with brain drain. The high level of violence would spill into neighbouring countries. Pakistan will be the most affected one with violence and IDPs pouring into its borders.(74)

In fourth scenario, the Quetta Shura and the Taliban both show willingness to engage in direct talks with the new Afghan government viewed as being representative of the Afghan people, unlike Karzai's puppet government. Pakistan, out of fear of instability, would assist in Afghanistan's peace process. The Afghan government relatively becomes strong by 2017, having a balance of all ethnic and tribal representatives out of opposition fears; and lastly, the Taliban would share power in the government of Afghanistan. Afghanistan would in turn tackle spoilers with war interests. Although violence would settle down, yet the guarantee of constitutional human rights, particularly in regard to women, will be sacrificed.(75)

Hence, to conclude the whole future scenario, a lot depends on three crucial factors. Firstly, the political stability of the new Afghan government in post-2014; secondly, the capabilities of the ANSF to resist and counter the Taliban or other militant groups; and thirdly, the future strategies of the US. Put positively, all these factors would work independently as well as support each other in devising a strong, peaceful Afghanistan. For now, the future that awaits post-2014 Afghanistan can be a combination of the above-mentioned predictions. Given the present status of important transitions – political, security and economic – that Afghanistan is going through, the continuity of international financial and military support with the ANSF training will be the backbone for its survival.

The transition phase from the ISAF to the ANSF will not be smooth; but the limited yet strategic placement of foreign troops alongside air strikes and ground combat operations would ensure that the Taliban face a tough battle with the ANSF. The Taliban will not be strong enough to capture Kabul but will keep on creating their usual disturbance. President Ghani has offered peace and flexibility to understand the insurgent's point of view. Two options exist of dealing ultimately with the Taliban: either a tough defeat or a power sharing agreement.

The commitments and interests of the US are crucial. Although Washington keeps highlighting about its global strategic interests in regions other than Afghanistan, one of the biggest embassies out of three has been built in Kabul. Certainly the US will be staying in Afghanistan for a longer period of time. The al-Qaeda threats are not over yet, and the possibility of an ISIS and Taliban nexus in Afghanistan would be an issue not just for the US but also for Afghanistan and the neighbouring region.(76)

## Implications for the neighbours

The anxieties of Afghanistan's post-2014 transition are much higher among the neighbouring countries than what the West feels. If the situation becomes gradually stable, all credit would go to the US and the Western allies. If the situation worsens, which is at present the primary observation, and the West packs up and pulls outs, the regional neighbours will be left behind to experience the calamitous spill-over implications. An intense sense of pessimism has engulfed the region and each neighbouring country is trying to find out what will happen in Afghanistan and the region once the drawdown begins.

The regional situation is very complex. Afghans and their neighbours all have so many diverging and competing interests, unsettling alliances, lack of cohesive or interrelated plan for the future that each neighbour is left with nothing but a pessimistic scenario. In general, the concern of the region is that when powerful militaries with so much wealth and resources were unable to change the Afghan situation, how could countries like Pakistan, Iran or the Central Asian Republics do better? Lessons of the Soviets and at present of the US and NATO allies are fresh in the minds of weaker regional states.

Afghanistan's strategic importance might lessen for the US and the West, but it remains crucially important for the regional states that are genuinely concerned about the return of another proxy war. For the time being, regional politics will play a significant role in shaping the internal dynamics of Afghanistan. The main bordering countries of landlocked Afghanistan with considerate concerns and opportunities to preserve their share of interest in the post-2014 Afghanistan are: Pakistan, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

### Pakistan

For the past three decades, Afghanistan is deeply infested with internal and external turmoil and Pakistan has been gravely bearing the brunt. For the US, the war in Afghanistan is coming to a final phase, while for Pakistan a new phase is opening up with a set of overlapping crisis. What lies in Afghanistan's future lacks clarity and essentially needs a cautious approach. Already Pakistan and Afghanistan are at loggerheads due to a number of concerning grey areas. The post-2014 Afghanistan brings huge security challenges for Pakistan, both in the traditional and non-traditional domains. Some of these domains for Pakistani society are the growing trust deficit between the two countries that has created mutual suspicion over each other's commitments towards counter terrorism efforts, peace dialogue with Taliban, cross border infiltration, and uncontrollable refugee invasion.

A root cause of the threatening security crisis between Afghanistan and Pakistan can be traced to an Afghan dispute over the Durand line, an international border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Due to an unrecognized status within Afghanistan, the border remains porous and unguarded, which should not be the case in such a volatile situation. The unchecked flow of cross border infiltration from Afghanistan into the insecure tribal region of Pakistan,

and vice versa, has been a major advantage for militants to have safe havens. In the past, Karzai has accused Pakistan over the safe haven issue; but whenever Islamabad tried to undertake any administrative and security measures to protect the Pakistani side of the border, Afghan officials raised complaints.(77) Even the international media, which remains critical about the cross border infiltration, has never pressurized Afghan state to resolve the border issue for halting militant activities. According to a report of International Organization for Migration (IOM), a startling 390,000 Afghans passed through a single border crossing on the Pak-Afghan border, in both directions, in a single two-week period in January 2005.(78) Throughout the last decade, the Afghan intelligence and local officials held Pakistani forces and intelligence responsible for the attacks in southern and eastern areas of Afghanistan without even acknowledging the fact that the insurgents based in the southern and eastern cities of Afghanistan launch missiles on Pakistani posts. Pakistan's protests, however, have fallen to deaf ears.

Pakistan has legitimate security concerns. If Afghanistan goes through a failed security transition, Taliban's resurgence will be stronger than before with no hopes of reviving the peace talks. The Pakistani Taliban might end up building alliances with the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan's security would be equally at a high risk of deteriorating. This compels Pakistan to make sure that the Afghan Taliban does not align with the Pakistani insurgents. Moreover, if the security transition goes as planned where the ANSF fights along with foreign troops' air and ground operations against the insurgents, Pakistan will again be at risk of grave security implications from spill-over of insurgency from Afghanistan. There will be a heavy presence of both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and other militants in its tribal region; this strength will be a boost for the Pakistani Taliban to fight back the Pakistani army from a stronger position, thereby increasing Pakistan's risk of insecurity.

Pakistan is a weak state with external security risks at both sides of the borders, one with India on the East and the other with Afghanistan on the West. Unfortunately Pakistan is sandwiched between the alliance of its two neighbours. Pakistan's anxiety over harmonious ties between India and Afghanistan had been exploited to its fullest by Karzai. Pakistan worries about the antagonistic policies of the new Afghan president; would it be a pro-Indian tilt once again like his predecessor or mature act of balancing ties? Or will Karzai continue to demoralize Pakistan through his rhetoric while Ghani puts up a good neighbourly act? So far, the recent visit of President Ghani to Islamabad was received as an optimistic wave of beginning a new era between the two countries. Ghani showed determination to end the hostilities and instead placed emphasis on efforts on mutual constructive engagements of trade and people-to-people connectivity in resolving counter-terrorism and strategic issues.(79) But then again, for how long will Ghani put up with this good act? If Pakistan fails to meet Ghani's expectations, then he like Karzai may also use Pakistan as a scapegoat.

However, with foreign assistance and strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan, and India's Northern Alliance in power, it is not certain

how India will roll out its policies in future. But for sure, it will provide a tough competition to Pakistan, possibly by collaborating with other regional countries like Iran and the Central Asian Republics to block out resources for Pakistan. India is already tacitly partnering with Iran to corner Pakistan by constructing roads to connect the Iranian port of Chahbahar to Afghanistan. Also it has made an attempt to get to Central Asian resource markets without going through Pakistan, limiting Pakistan's opportunities for market access on its way.[80] Hence, Islamabad is occupied enough with insurgency at home in FATA and it cannot afford an allied regime in Kabul with India and Iran against Pakistan.

Pakistan's military is in the midst of operation *Zarb-e-Azb* against the Pakistani Taliban and allied Islamist fighters in its volatile North Waziristan region to clear the region of all insurgents. However, whether or not the insurgents include the Afghan Taliban, i.e. the Haqqani network, is debatable. Karzai had been supporting prominent Pakistani Taliban commanders Latifullah Mehsud and Fazlullah. Karzai's schemes of destabilizing Pakistan through RAW and his anti-Pakistan approach were exposed through Wikileak papers.[81] The Afghan Taliban had also been regularly sheltering and funding the Pakistani Taliban. Mullah Fazlullah, a Pakistani Taliban leader, who launched Swat offensive in 2009 was given sanctuary in the Kunar province of Afghanistan.[82] The fragile state of Pakistan fears two civil wars in such a situation if it cracks down on Afghan Taliban's safe havens conceivably an only viable option in the absence of proper border security for Pakistan to counter Indo-Afghan alliance against its security. This is an important reason why Pakistan is taking cautious approach regarding actions against the Afghan Taliban.[83]

There had always been an environment of mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan. But during the last decade, Karzai not only fractured bilateral ties by propagating against Pakistan at home and abroad, but he was also adamant for the US to attack Pakistan through introducing an Afghan protection policy in the BSA.[84] He had also been responsible for instigating anti-Pakistan sentiments among Afghans. The human cost that Pakistan has paid through civilian casualties is about 19,702, and 6,003 military casualties as of November 2014[85] and about $29 billion had been lost in the three years through June 2014, whereas $232 billion of economy has lost $102 billion since the 2001 US war in Afghanistan began.[86]Instead of any genuine acknowledgement and respect by Afghan officials, a level of furious accusations and criticisms about Pakistan's commitment against fighting counter-terrorism had been raised. Offended sentiments vis-à-vis the Afghan approach still prevails in Pakistan.

Another challenging burden on Pakistan's economy and scarce resources in the wake of post-2014 is the increasing presence of the world's largest refugee population coming from Afghanistan into Pakistan. Pakistan is already sheltering about three million registered and undocumented Afghan refugees. The people of Pakistan especially of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province had badly suffered due to these refugees for the last many decades since the Soviet invasion. People are not ready to tolerate more of them. The refugee stay date decided by the Pakistani government will expire by December 2015. Despite a firm decision of not welcoming more refugees in Pakistan, the Afghan

refugee invasion would be further uncontrollable and untraceable if Afghanistan becomes more unstable.[87] At times many insurgents enter in Pakistan by disguising themselves as refugees. They settle down cautiously in the urban and ungoverned tribal areas of Pakistan, causing security threats to the locals. Hence, the past influx had brought violence and intolerance into Pakistani urban areas and with the new influx beginning in 2013, the domestic situation is likely to be apprehensive.

For the new president, a softening and cooperative stance towards Pakistan would essentially be a hopeful sign to bridge the gaps of mistrust so that both the countries can jointly work against the spread of insurgency. So far President Ghani has expressed willingness to open dialogue with the Taliban with Pakistan's assistance. Although it is highly misperceived in Afghanistan that Pakistan has leverage over the Taliban. In actuality, the Taliban only listen to their own interests. Still Pakistan has been supporting Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. To facilitate the process, Islamabad has released Afghan prisoners in its custody as well. Pakistan has also suggested holding a broad-based 'all-inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue' in Qatar where all the Afghan insurgent factions including the Haqqani network are also invited to negotiate the future peace settlement.[88]

For future options, Pakistan can initiate a multi-tier approach with the new Afghan president at the bilateral and international levels by supporting certain policy initiatives. Key initiatives can be as follows: a direly needed Strategic Security Agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan like the one Kabul has signed with India, China and Iran; bilateral confidence-building measures between Afghanistan and Pakistan; a mutual counter-terrorism policy to counter the growing strength of Taliban and other insurgents; the settlement of the Durand Line issue to control cross-border infiltration and target sanctuaries of insurgents on both sides of border; the settlement of water-sharing arrangements and treaties and the construction of dams for water storage to avert future tussle. Pakistan relies on water flowing from Afghanistan's Kabul River which is predicted to be considerably depleted by 2026;[89] a regional peace treaty with the assistance of US by which a regional non-interference status is declared; facilitation of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process when asked by Afghanistan; engaging Afghan Businessmen with Pakistani businessmen by holding extensive meetings for assisting each other economically similar to parliamentary engagements at higher level; engaging people-to-people links to dispel doubts and anti-Pakistan sentiments among Afghans.

In short, Pakistan must emphasize on building a friendly Afghanistan than a friendly government in Kabul. Letting the Afghans decide their future, Pakistan should support and facilitate them.

### Iran

The defeat of the Taliban created a favourable environment for the Iranian government to influence the new political developments in Afghanistan. James Dobbins, the US special envoy for Afghanistan in 2001, revealed at the

Bonn Conference that it was Iran who suggested that Hamid Karzai should lead Afghanistan. Iran supported a multi-ethnic, sectarian Islamic Afghan government comprised of mujahedeen leaders headed by a Pashtun leader.[90] Interestingly, the present Unity Government in Afghanistan is somewhat similarly based on multi-ethnic representation headed by a Pashtun leader. The present political environment also goes in Iran's favour.

Iran has multiple interests in Afghanistan and safeguarding them is one of Iran's biggest concerns. The mutual ethno-cultural linkages shared by Iran and Afghanistan are important as they ensure Iranian influence in the country. It is in Iranian interest to secure its economic jurisdiction through accessing Afghanistan's transit route across Asia, from Persian Gulf to Central Asia and China. Afghanistan is also vital to Iran's political-security national interests that are threatened by the rising terrorist and extremist spread from Afghanistan into neighbouring regional countries.[91]

Since the ousting of the Taliban, Iran has pursued a two pronged policy in Afghanistan: first, to preserve Afghanistan's stability and support Afghan democratic central government; and second, to oppose the presence of foreign forces especially the US in Afghanistan.[92] It is perceived that if the situation remains stable in post-2014 Afghanistan, Iran would continue to pursue these interests. Any instability caused by an Afghan weak state would not only spread terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking and displaced Afghans but also pose political-security threats to Iran's national interests. Iran seeks to preserve stability at its eastern border from threats, which is why it has focused on a developmental approach in the eastern parts of Afghanistan. The geographical regions that come under Iranian spheres of influence have been a focus of economic development. Iran has committed $560 million in economic assistance to Afghanistan from 2002 to 2007. From 2007 to 2013, Tehran has mainly focused on the completion of those existing projects. The economic strategy employed in the western Herat province of Afghanistan was two-fold: to keep Iran's own economic conditions thriving that are under constant sanctions by the West through trade and transit; and to consolidate its political and strategic hegemony in the country.[93]

Another reason for upholding stability and economic assistance to Afghanistan was to pullout the country from its constant dependent behaviour on foreign aid. Iranian perception is that a weak Afghanistan dependent on US financial and security assistance will make it submissive to US demands in dealing with various crucial matters that may sabotage Iran's national interests in Afghanistan. Tehran feels direct threats to its national security from the foreign military bases and the presence of troops especially of the US and Britain in Afghanistan. Hence, the Iranian pressures began on Afghanistan to take the lead in its country's security and ask for a withdrawal timetable of foreign forces. Moreover, Iranian political and financial influence persuaded Karzai not to sign the strategic security pact of the BSA with the US.[94]

Tehran opposes the presence of foreign troops due to three main concerns. First, it believes that foreign forces, especially that of the US nurture the spread of extremism in Afghanistan. Taliban's resistance of US troops ends

up expanding terrorist activities. Second, Iran wants to contain the US threat. Tehran perceives the presence of the US troops in Afghanistan as an opportunity for the US to expand its strategic position in the broader region of South Asia, Central Asia and Persian Gulf at the expense of Iran's national security interests. Third, Iran aspires to preserve Afghanistan's neutrality. Tehran opposes its border in neighbours like Afghanistan in establishing political security pacts with trans-regional actors.[95]

To preserve its interests especially against the US, Iran can also act as a spoiler via its long nurtured networks. In the future, if the US puts more sanctions on Iran, then it won't be surprising to see numerous networks of hardliners in Afghanistan voicing their support for Iran. Since the 80s, Iran has supported a myriad of warlords, well-established proxies beyond ethnic, sectarian and political lines as an insurance policy to be used when required even if civil war breaks out. While forging its relations with the Afghan government and supporting the peace process, Iran can pursue a more destabilizing and disruptive strategy against the US interests. Like in 2010, Iran banned the export of fuel to Afghanistan as a pressure tactic on Karzai against the US pressures on Iran to freeze its nuclear programme. Hence, Karzai distanced himself from the US and called for NATO forces withdrawal to please Iran.[96]

The only tolerating factor for Tehran towards foreign presence in Afghanistan is a flaring hypothesis that Afghanistan will fall back into a civil war as it had after the Soviet withdrawal. The Iranian government's endorsement of the peace process since 2010, despite its traditional hardliner stance towards Taliban, was also due to the rising Taliban threats in the region. This even led to three visits of the Taliban delegation to Tehran in March 2011 and June 2013. Engagement with the Taliban demonstrated Tehran's ambition to be a prominent mediating actor in not only any future challenging peace settlement but also in the 2014 transitional phase.

The changing political realities in Afghanistan led Iran to open up to accepting Taliban in the future political framework, but not in a dominating position. Any future role of the Taliban in Afghan politics will be suspiciously monitored by Tehran. Besides Taliban's resurgence, Iran is wary of an alliance between the insurgents and Iran-based terrorist groups to act against Tehran's national security interests. Therefore, Iran has been supporting its preferred Taliban group to consolidate influence in case they come in power. However, in case the situation after the transition becomes uncontrollable, then Iran might choose its traditional allies, i.e. the Northern Alliance.[97]

The transitional phase of Afghanistan will push more Afghans into Iran. Iranian economy under international sanctions will come under more burden by additional refugees. Iran will take firm measures to minimize the refugee acceleration. In 2012, Tehran had ended the registration period of Comprehensive Regularization Plan (CRP), which allowed Afghans to legalize their status. But only some 800,000 out of about 3 million Afghans in Iran are recognized refugees.[98] The insecurity would further escalate the drug trade. As of now, almost 80 percent of Afghans cross border into Iran through the

mediation of smugglers. Worsening security situation could lead to further economic migration especially if Afghanistan fails to provide adequate employment opportunities.[99]

Iran at present is carefully observing the US and NATO plans in Afghanistan before it can make a policy for post-2014 situation. The post-transition Iranian foreign policy will have two themes: 'cooperation' and 'rivalry,' driven by imminent factors and with local proxies and players like the Taliban, as well as with regional and external players like the US. Important driving factors would be a small presence of the US forces strategically placed in Afghanistan; continuous threats emerging from an aggressive insurgent fighting that would continue to generate instability in Afghanistan and along its near borders; possibilities of reintegrating Taliban in the future Afghan political setup through peace process; the maintenance of its political and strategic influence through economic soft power; the thriving of drug industry and hampering of Iranian interests; and the continuation of refugee influx in the wake of Afghan insecurity into Iran.

The more Iran will become isolated in the world through sanctions initiated by the US in the future, the more it will rely on its ethnic and economic hegemony in Afghanistan to keep its regional connections alive. Iran has been aiding and supporting the Shia Hazara minority in the western parts of Afghanistan. Herat comes under the regional integration strategy of Iran.

Iran has broader economic interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia that it desires to achieve through linking the region. Afghanistan has been pivotal to the 'Look-East' grand strategy of Iran. Tehran's regional vision aims at increasing transit trade through its Chahbahar port in the Southeast, with the participation of Afghanistan and India. Tehran is already constructing road and rail links through parts of Afghanistan to enter into Turkmenistan.[100]

A weak government in Kabul after 2014 would be beneficial not only for Taliban insurgents but would also allow Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to play a pivotal role. To counter Saudi and Pakistani proxy interests, Iran would indulge in securing cordial relations with as many Afghan factions — from the Central government to Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks — as possible. So far the Bilateral Strategic Security Agreement signed between Tehran and Kabul positions Iran at a dominating position in the future to have closer cooperation in security, intelligence and economics, as compared to other mutual regional allies.[101]

## China

China has pursued a very clear, prudent and articulated foreign policy towards Afghanistan. China, as Afghanistan's regional neighbour, strategic partner and one of the largest foreign investors, has always kept a low profile in Afghanistan as compared to other regional neighbours. During the past three decades — when Afghanistan was under the Soviet influence, then engulfed in civil war, overtaken by the Taliban and then monopolized by the US — China cautiously restricted itself to a secondary position. Presently, however, the international community and the Afghan government expect China to assume a larger active role in future Afghan affairs.[102]

Unlike the West, China has limited goals in Afghanistan. Beijing had no interests in rebuilding the political system of Afghanistan, or directing their domestic affairs like social patterns and ideological orientations. However, since the official visit of the Chinese Security Chief Zhou Yongkang to Kabul in 2012, China has signalled to be more active in Afghanistan. Previously, Afghanistan was only viewed as an external instability threat but now the country has become an internal instability risk as well for China. Beijing has two major concerns attached with Afghanistan: 1) security, an interest and a core concern; 2) exploitation of investment opportunities.[(103)]

China's diplomacy of becoming more active in the future affairs of Afghanistan has been motivated by its own stability and security concerns rising from Uighurs in its Xinjiang province. Afghanistan's security turmoil has strongly influenced the Uighur militants and their East Turkistan movement in terrorism and separatist goals in Xinjiang. The Uighur militants are closely connected with Taliban and al-Qaeda since the fight against the Soviets. Later under Taliban, Afghanistan became a reliable base for supplying weapons, training camps and sheltering militant organization.[(104)] With the announcement of the US drawdown and no hopes of stability coming to Afghanistan after a decade of foreign presence there, China has decided to take the matters in its own hands. If the post-drawdown situation deteriorates, the insecurity in Afghanistan will inevitably spill-over to China. Hence, without resolving the security issue in Afghanistan, China cannot guarantee its own security.

China and Afghanistan signed a strategic and cooperative partnership on 8 June 2012, by which they agreed "not to allow their respective territory to be used for any activities targeted against the other side." With this cooperation pact, China hopes to combat "three evil forces", i.e. ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism, and is committed to "take tangible measures to enhance the security of Chinese institutions and the people in Afghanistan."[(105)] During the visit of Zhou Yongkang on 22 September 2012, agreements were signed with the Afghan government on intelligence sharing and on the training of 300 Afghan policemen [(106)] and officers in China. Beijing, so far, restrains itself from getting involved in the Afghan military training and even the possibility of sending its troops to Afghanistan has been rejected. Beijing will still continue to be cautious regarding its' military involvement and leave the matter to foreign troops beyond 2014 as decided. Probably for now, it is a realistic approach of keeping its men and resources out of risk. China refused to join the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which was also established to transfer non lethal goods to the US and the ISAF troops in Afghanistan.[(107)]

Through this cautious approach, China also wants to maintain a safe distance from the American campaign in Afghanistan. Moreover, Beijing does not want to infuriate the Taliban so it keeps minimum direct contact with them and this explains its low-profile approach. Beijing has never sympathized with Taliban and has officially supported the operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. At the same time, it has also never publicly condemned the Taliban, probably as a diplomatic gesture of non-interference. China is aware that the Taliban today are not just an extremist religious group but also a

political force that might become a part of Afghan's political arena if the reconciliation policy turns out effective. Or in the other possible scenario, Taliban might appear as a dominating force leading the country into another civil debacle. Hence, in both scenarios, China wants no contact between the Taliban and the East Turkistan militants to avoid detrimental consequences.[108]

To prevent a Uighur safe haven in Afghanistan, Beijing had pursued engagement and negotiation option with Taliban in the past. China directly contacted Taliban leader Mullah Omar to seek his assurance for not harbouring Uighur militants attacking Xinjiang in areas controlled by them and to prevent militant attacks from there against China and its nationals in Afghanistan. Although the negotiations were unsuccessful, Beijing still quietly maintained contacts with the Quetta Shura after 9/11 attacks with the help of Pakistan.[109] To seek a secure Afghanistan, Chinese government agrees and supports the national reconciliation peace process as the right path to a secure and stable Afghanistan. While China has limited itself to diplomacy, it has resorted to make use of Shanghai Corporation Organization (SCO) for mustering regional approach on matters of security and stability. China has even started dialogues on regional reconciliation in forums such as the Heart of Asia 2014 conference. But Beijing has clearly laid out to all countries that it is supportive of a settlement where the Taliban can become a part of the political system, but it is against a Taliban government in Afghanistan.[110]

Afghanistan today offers potential benefits and influential opportunities to China. Previously due to Xinjiang disturbances, Chinese economic concentration had been on its eastern coastal region. But lately Beijing has turned its attention towards filing the economic disparity gaps in the western region with a "go-west" strategy. Between 2002 and 2010, Chinese aid to Afghanistan was about $205 million.[111] But while meeting with Karzai this year in Shanghai for the Conference on Interactions and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Chinese President Xi Jinping assured to increase cooperation with Afghanistan and work with Afghanistan on the construction of Silk Road Economic Belt, an ambitious vision of linking China to Europe via Central Asia and the Middle East.[112]

The first official visit made by the new Afghan President was to China, which turned out to be a success with Chinese pledge to provide 2 billion yuan ($330 million) in grant to Afghanistan through 2017, besides signing four other agreements on economic and technical cooperation.[113] During the fourth ministerial conference of Istanbul process held lately in Beijing on 1 November 2014, China offered non-reimbursable assistance of 500 million yuan (about $81.43 million) and another non-reimbursable assistance of 1.5 billion yuan (about $244 million) for over three years to Afghanistan to help train 3,000 people of all circles in the upcoming five years with 500 scholarships.[114]

China has already marked its presence among the biggest investors in Afghanistan by winning the rights to Aynak copper mine project in 2008. In 2011, China secured an energy deal when China National Petroleum Corporation signed a $600 million contract to invest in developing three oil blocks in the Amu Darya basin.[115] Unfortunately, due to regular rocket fires in

the Aynak area, Chinese workers had no choice but to evacuate. While the oil project at Amu Darya also faced disruption by militias affiliated with Rashid Dostum. China strikes a deal with Dostum to resolve the conflict to stop his men from interfering with the project. China had been willing to bargain with troublesome actors to guarantee the security of its projects.[116] Beijing even tried to negotiate with Taliban to prevent attacks on its nationals working on projects in Afghanistan. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that Chinese companies would have to acquire permission from Taliban for their project, then "their lives might be spared."[117]

In the economic investment sector, China is also in competition with India in Afghanistan over resources. Both China and India prefer to have a stable environment in Afghanistan to exploit maximum resources at their disposal. For Pakistan, a strong Chinese presence alleviates its fears of being encircled. While an India, Iran and Afghanistan nexus would isolate Pakistan in the region, China would balance regional tensions by holding trilateral dialogues between Afghanistan and Pakistan.[118]

Hence, Beijing's initial strategy for 2014 is well-established in terms of courting an active economic partner in Afghanistan, enhancing international cooperation and encouraging peace through political reconciliation. But limits to its diplomacy will be tested if the situation worsens. To reduce security threats, Beijing will attempt to stabilize Afghanistan or will prevent further deterioration of Afghan security; or if it cannot stabilize and secure Afghanistan, it will limit the spread of instability and the direct threat to Xinjiang with the help of its regional ally Pakistan.[119]

## Central Asian Republics

Three of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – share porous borders with Afghanistan. All three states also share centuries old ethnic kinships in Afghanistan. Tajiks and Uzbeks are the second and third largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan. These ethnic groups along with the Hazara Shia and Turkmens have ties with Central Asian Republics. Tajikistan and Afghanistan also have political complexities. The multiple connections were developed during the 1992-97 civil war in Tajikistan. These Central Asian Republics were the principal external supporters of military leaders like Tajik Ahmad Shah Massoud, the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance leader who became a buffer between Central Asians and Taliban and leader of Uzbek community in Afghanistan, and Gen. Rashid Dostum, who is currently serving as the Vice-President of Afghanistan.[120] With the Pashtun-Tajik-Uzbek alliance-based Unity Government in power, the Central Asian Republics would hopefully have a friendly neighbourhood, politically.

Since the collapse of the Soviet, the CARs had been left with porous borders and weak security structures to handle on their own. Threats perceived by these states depend on the level of each state's exposure and vulnerability to security challenges coming from Afghanistan. Out of three, Tajikistan is the most exposed one while Uzbekistan has considerable border protection

capacities. Turkmenistan, due to its neutral status, always felt less vulnerable to border spill-over threats but lately its situation has also changed.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the CARs eagerly agreed to assist the US-led War on Terrorism and later the NATO-led ISAF operations in Afghanistan. The suppression of Islamic extremism has been supported by the Central Asian Republics. For the US and the NATO countries, Islamic extremism is the only major threat emerging in post-2014 but for the neighbouring Central Asian Republics other interests are at stake as well. The key security risks for the CARs would be: threats of terrorism and insurgency, the political radicalization of their people, the spread of drug trafficking and of organized crime of arms and weaponry.(121)

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan had been under insurgency threats from Afghanistan since their independence in the early 90s. The United Tajik Opposition (UTO), an anti-government force in the 1992-97 civil wars in Tajikistan, comprised of Islamists and anti-Soviet democrats operated from and found sanctuary in Afghanistan. Even in 2010, a noteworthy rise in deadly clashes in Tajikistan between government forces and insurgents occurred. One of the incidents resulted in the killing of 28 Tajik soldiers by al-Qaeda linked group near the border with Afghanistan. The Islamist extremists also plotted unrest and an overthrow of government. Uzbekistan is vulnerable to threats from the insurgent group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) that operates with impunity from the Afghan soil. IMU seeks to establish a caliphate across Central Asia and launched two major attacks in 1999 and in 2000. As an ally of Taliban, the IMU also came under US-led attacks in Afghanistan. However, it reconstituted itself in the North Waziristan region of Pakistan and forged links with groups like the Haqqani Network. Since 2008, IMU has consolidated its existence in the northern parts of Afghanistan to launch renewed attacks on Uzbekistan once the ISAF departs.(122)

The growing cross-border armed infiltration and insurgency instigating from safe haven bases in Afghanistan would set a precedent for dangerous political instability in Central Asia. Despite the effectiveness of the ANSF, there is little confidence among the Central Asian Republics in their capacity to take the fight with Taliban independently once the foreign troops depart. Hence, it won't be surprising to see the Central Asian Republics backing the US-ANSF forces carrying out combat operations against the insurgents. For Tajikistan, Russia provides security through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) but it cannot become an inclusive multilateral organization as the other two neighbours Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are not its members.(123)

The bordering neighbours of Afghanistan in Central Asia are exposed to societal threats emanating from Afghanistan similar to the potential radicalized elements these states had been dealing with for the past decades. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in particular, have suffered from militant attempts to penetrate into their individual territories. The Central Asian Republics fear that the Afghan government influenced by Taliban would maximize their power and support for the creation of networks and training camps, and support bases to nurture Central Asian Islamic fundamentalists near the border. The governments

of these states are committed to preserving their secular state identities. This is one of the significant reasons behind their opposition or inactive role in Afghanistan's reconciliatory efforts, fearing that the states would become more Islamic in character.

The key question is whether Taliban would agree to resume the peace process or not; or if they agree, then which group would take the lead, Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura, Haqqani Network or Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami. There appear three scenarios for the states to consider. The best scenario is where at least one segment of the insurgent movement opts for dialogue and joins the Afghan government through the reconciliation process. The success of one segment would act as a domino factor and others would also embrace peace eventually. In such a case, the expediency of regional economies and pending development projects would be beneficial for the Central Asian Republics. The second scenario might involve a status-quo, where the Afghan government, Taliban and other insurgent factions would continue fighting. This would leave no choice for the Central Asian Republics but to take their own security measures for protecting their territories and people from radicalization. The third and worst scenario would be a strong and fierce resurgence of Taliban bringing Afghanistan to the brink of civil war compelling even the foreign forces to leave the country.[(124)] This kind of situation would compel the Central Asian Republics to close down their borders with the help of Russia and China.

The Tajik-Afghan border has become a preferred route for narcotics and drug traffickers. The traffickers smuggle Afghan heroin through Tajikistan and Central Asia before connecting with Russian, European and Chinese markets, hence, fuelling widespread corruption. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), every year around 90 tonnes of heroin are produced in Afghanistan and transported through Central Asia. In the case of a civil war in Afghanistan, drug trade would be the insurgent's most preferred source of income.[(125)]

The withdrawal of the US-led NATO-ISAF mission will hamper the lucrative multi-vector strategy in foreign policy that opened up political and economic avenues for them outside their periphery. In contrast to Russia and China, the CARs had welcomed the US and the NATO in the region not just out of security concerns but for also providing them with increasing bargaining power with Moscow and Beijing, and with the US and the NATO countries in the form of transit fees and infrastructural assistance. Given their geo-strategic location, these three states have exploited the external player's competition by enhancing their profitable economic, energy and military cooperation with foreign forces.

First of all, the presence of the ISAF took away threats of the Taliban and the associated regional terrorist groups like IMU from the region even though the ISAF did not directly confront with IMU and drug trafficking. ISAF presence also protected the secular identities of the Central Asian Republics, restraining the rise of Political Islam in the respective countries. The CARs have also benefited from the long desired legitimacy and financial support from ISAF.[(126)]

Uzbekistan was the first country to offer the use of military facilities as part of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which later became a transit hub for foreign troops. The US even agreed to pay more transit fees in times of crisis. Turkmenistan also opened some roads and airfields to foreign troops for delivering non-lethal supplies. The leasing of bases was financially beneficial, it gave them bargaining edge; for instance, when Uzbekistan was under EU sanctions, the German government paid 67.9 million euro for the use of Tarmiz airbase; France granted low-interest long-term loan of 20 million euro to Tajikistan for building a new airport terminal at Dushanbe.(127)

Although once beneficial, it is feared that the NDN opportunities could become an excuse in the hands of terrorist groups for launching attacks on the Central Asian Republics. The NDN carried 3-4 percent non-lethal supplies for the US and NATO forces. The NDN remained vital when ISAF's routes to Afghanistan through Pakistan were blocked.(128) By mid-2013, the Central Asian route was serving as a means for carrying out80 percent of the sustainable operations in Afghanistan.(129)

Possible economic interests for the CARs face security risks. Soviet economic planning had focused mainly on the northern parts of region that linked with Russia. Therefore, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan lack the desired infrastructure. These landlocked neighbouring countries have numerous resources waiting for larger markets within and outside the region. Tajikistan wants to end its transportation isolation while Uzbekistan managed to grasp certain strategic opportunities that it fears might be affected. The potential of oil and gas energy resources within the Central Asian Republics has attracted attention from all over the neighbouring regions. Yet unless the security and insurgency threats in Afghanistan are not resolved to provide a secure transit route, all future regional economic prospects are illusionary. For instance the most awaited high-profile project of Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, a project to connect Central Asia via Afghanistan to South Asia; the Central Asia-South Asia electricity grid (CASA-1000) which envisages the export of electricity from Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan; and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway project. All of them, in tandem, stand hindered by Afghan instability.(130)

The CARs had proposed certain regional initiatives to achieve a regional security solution by deeply involving the other regional states in the decision process. In 2008, Uzbekistan proposed a '6+3 Contact Group for Afghanistan,' under the auspices of the UN. The group included Afghanistan's neighbours, China, Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Russia as well as the US and the NATO. It aims at resolving ethnic and religious factions involved in the conflict with Afghan government and reviving economic initiatives. Tajikistan proposed an initiative referred as the 'Dushanbe Four' in 2009, comprising of Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan to have a quadrilateral cooperation for resolving security and economic issues. In 2010, Turkmenistan proposed to assist, under the UN auspices, an international high-level meeting on 'Confidence Building in Afghanistan'.(131)

Unfortunately the absence of a desired international support and the lack of resources to support the initiatives have marred the success of regional efforts. These Central Asian Republics have political limitations in developing a regional course of solutions on their own in Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

After a decade of US-NATO presence, Afghanistan is still at the brink of deterioration. Insurgency is still thriving, economy is still sinking, and security is still descending. The inheritance that welcomes Ghani is full of internal and external challenges. Afghanistan today is more complex and vulnerable to disintegration than what Karzai had inherited. Karzai had full support of the international community with extensive assistance and finances for the Afghans, all of which pales in comparison to that available to Ghani. For a sustainable transition and stable future, besides security assurances, one biggest task for the Afghan government would be to fight against the economy of corruption. So far the gains made in the social sector are not likely to be stable if no guarantees of a functional state are there. A peace process with or without outside support requires persistence efforts to ensure stability at home and in the region.

Success of the Afghanistan's Unity Government will be determined by six critical factors: political transition and necessary implementation of reforms; the readiness and capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces; economic growth and necessary reforms; continuation of international financial assistance; regional diplomacy and foreign policy shifts; last but not the least, persistent headway into the much needed peace process. The transition from "their supervision" to "our supervision" with a new series of command and operational strategies, skills and fund management would be tough to deal with in a short span of time.

Afghanistan's geography can serve as a central point of connection for the neighbouring regions. A regional peace treaty is needed. Afghanistan has for decades been a theatre of war, caught in the rivalry between various external powers. The United States, Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics have different and often conflicting interests in Afghanistan. All the regional neighbours are more focused on creating their own hub of influence and interest-based regional networks against each country within the region. If not the Taliban, then regional divergence of interests' schemes would make Afghanistan another battleground in the region. If the US leaves behind a messy Afghanistan, Pakistan will get destabilized, ultimately leading to the destabilization of the whole region.

For all their proclamations, all the regional neighbours of Afghanistan recognize the consequences of the US drawdown from Afghanistan. An early departure will leave behind a power vacuum ready to be filled by the insurgents that the ANSF won't be able to handle. Moreover, the regional powers would not remain idle; they will have an opportunity to intervene, leading to another new series of proxy and civil wars. The prospects of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan beyond 2014 are limited. Afghanistan will continue to remain a

security risk for itself, for the West, and for the region. One withdrawal legacy that the Super Power could leave this time would be a regional pact of non-interference between the neighbours. This might help in containing the already muddled situation in Afghanistan and the region. To conclude, Afghan's national security and state rebuilding requires singular attentionby the international community and regional neighbours in the limited timeframe that is still available.

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