

Introduction

Regional interference in Afghanistan has continued for 35 years since the Soviet invasion of the country. During this period, the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan forcefully played out in Afghanistan. This was also the case concerning Saudi Arabia and Iran, and Pakistan and Iran. In the mean time, Russia, China and the Central Asian Republics have been watching closely as insecurities sharpen due to the international military drawdown and a resurgent Islamist threat. The interplay of political and geostrategic interests, mistrust and fears, and longstanding territorial challenges is responsible for spawning a regional insecurity contagion. Paradoxically though, the individual involvements of states in producing interlocking rivalries cannot be addressed or untangled through regional mechanisms attempting to produce wide scale cooperation. The most prominent of regional approaches, the “Heart of Asia” (also known as the Istanbul process) process faces serious challenges in attempting to bring about a political settlement as the process not only entails normalising one set of bilateral relations, but doing so in a manner that a bilateral-reset does not disrupt or spoil other sets of interstate relations that are part of the regional framework. Although well intentioned, the problem with the Istanbul process (and other initiatives) is its failure to appreciate the structural, contextual and cognitive challenges that impede the procuring of a regional solution. The interplay of these factors has meant that Afghanistan is an arena in which its neighbours fight out their regional rivalries, thereby trapping the landlocked country in a transnational struggle.

This paper will begin by providing an overview of the economic, political and military transitions underway in Afghanistan. Secondly, it will examine the Heart of Asia process and highlight its key tenets and obstacles. In the third, fourth and fifth sections of the paper, it discusses individual impediments from the structural, contextual and cognitive layers, preventing regional cooperation from gaining traction, respectively. The sixth and final section ends with the paper’s conclusion, which argues that the interplay of the structural, contextual and cognitive layers of challenges between Afghanistan and its regional stakeholders disables the prospect for regional cooperation.

Transitions in Afghanistan

2014 is a critical year in the economic, political and security transitions for Afghanistan. The removal of the Taliban regime in December 2001 heralded thirteen years of economic growth averaging at 9.5 percent per year, thereby more than doubling income per capita levels from US\$220 in 2004 to US\$678 in 2013.¹ The impressive growth rate was largely on the back of donor aid and in-country spending, a large number of international military forces which at their peak totalled 140,000, and rising domestic and international investments due to improving security conditions in some parts of the country. However, the resulting insecurity from the drawdown of international combat forces and the concomitant shrinking of international workers has shaken confidence in the Afghan economy as reflected by a drastic fall in its 2013 GDP growth rate from 14.4 to 4.2 percent.² According to the

¹ “GDP per capita (current US\$)”, The World Bank, at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD/countries/AF-8s?display=graph> [accessed 4 November 2014].

² “GDP growth (annual %)”, The World Bank, at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG/countries/AF-8s?display=graph> [accessed 4 November 2014].

International Monetary Fund's projection, the Afghan economy is estimated to grow at 4.7 percent until 2018 and could bounce up to 6 percent if improvements in security allow the mining sector to come on-stream, but in the longer term, growth is forecasted to settle at 4 percent.³ Observing this trend in external financial support, Barnett R. Rubin, has classified Afghanistan as a rentier state due to its dependence on foreign aid rather than on the production of goods and services by its people.⁴ As Afghanistan enters its decade of transition,⁵ it does so seeking to widen its taxation base as well as pursuing economic reforms and continued donor support. The economic transition is highly vulnerable as it hinges on Afghanistan's political stability and an improving security environment.

The political situation in Afghanistan remains challenging. Following the run-off presidential vote in June 2014, allegations of wholesale electoral fraud brought the country perilously close to disaster.⁶ Although both candidates, Dr Ashraf Ghani-Ahmadzai and Dr Abdullah Abdullah, appealed for calm, the long drawn out process of the elections amplified tensions and heightened uncertainty as the country's preliminary election results were intensely disputed. Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC) was the primary institution accused of engineering the electoral fraud to tilt the results in favour of Dr Ghani which the IEC flatly denied.⁷ The impasse only receded after the UN led a mediation response to audit all 8.1 million votes. The UN's full-scale audit was reinforced through the direct intervention of the U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, who persuaded both candidates to join

³ "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: Staff Report for the 2014 Article IV Consultation – Debt Sustainability Analysis", International Monetary Fund, 23 April 2014, p. 2 at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2014/cr14128.pdf> [accessed 4 November 2014].

⁴ Barnett R. Rubin argues that Afghanistan, since 1957, has received more than 40 percent of its income from foreign sources. See: Barnett R. Rubin, "Political Elites in Afghanistan: Rentier State Building, Rentier State Wrecking", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 24 No. 1, February 1992, pp. 77-99 at p. 78; Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, Second Edition, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 81-110.

⁵ Afghanistan's economic pressures in the decade of transition are likely to amplify as donor aid significantly reduces. In the past few years, donors have pledged their financial support for Afghanistan following the international military withdrawal at the end of 2014. At the NATO summit in Chicago in 2012, donors announced substantial pledges to fund Afghanistan's defence budget, estimated at around US\$4.1 billion per annum. However, the Afghan government is expected to progressively increase its contribution to meet its defence spending requirements. From 2015, it is envisaged that the Afghan government would be able to provide US\$500 million, with the aim that it will assume full financial responsibility for its security forces, no later than 2024. A second conference in Tokyo marshalled financial pledges for development aid of US\$16 billion through 2015 and to sustain aid at similar levels through 2017. See: "Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan", North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 21 May 2012, at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_87595.htm? [accessed 4 November 2014]; "Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan (Summary and Evaluation)", 8 July 2012, at http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/afghanistan/tokyo_conference_2012/summary.html [accessed 4 November 2014].

⁶ The author was an Independent Election Observer and observed the presidential election run-off vote in Kabul on June 14, 2014. His published account can be read here: Nishank Motwani, "Was the Afghan Election Stolen?", *Foreign Policy*, 3 July 2014, at http://southasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/07/03/was_the_afghan_election_stolen [accessed 4 November 2014].

⁷ "Abdullah Demands Stoppage Of Afghan Presidential Vote Count", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 June 2014 at <http://www.rferl.org/content/abdullah-demands-stoppage-of-afghan-presidential-vote-count-/25426602.html> [accessed 6 November 2014].

hands and form a “national unity government”.⁸ The country’s first democratic handover of power, albeit stained by “industrial scale” fraudulent voting, produced a unity government of questionable sustainability. It also reaffirmed the “winner takes all” nature of the presidential system that has no space for losers which in turn incentivizes electoral fraud and codifies endemic corruption. The lack of accountability further exacerbates this problem because crooked practices are seen as rewarding. However, the persistence of such methods will severely harm the notion of democracy amongst Afghans who are likely to question the point of voting particularly in the face of rising Taliban violence. Consequently, elections may no longer be considered to be a legitimate or credible process for political change, participation or representation. This dysfunction can create a highly unstable political pressure cooker without a pressure-releasing valve.

With the drawdown of international combat forces almost complete,⁹ the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are poised to assume full responsibility of providing security for the country. However, as the ANSF has taken over more control from the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), it has suffered a higher rate of casualties. For instance, as of March 2014, the total number of ANSF killed in the past 13 years stood at 13,729 with an additional 16,511 Afghan soldiers and police wounded.¹⁰ According to *The New York Times*, The Afghan death toll is four times higher than that of the ISAF, which has lost 3,425 soldiers, including 2,313 Americans, during the conflict.¹¹ These figures naturally point to a more resilient and active Taliban which is simultaneously escalating its engagements and testing the capabilities of the ANSF to take advantage of the security vacuum left behind. The sharp increase in casualties is also reflected in the number of documented civilian losses in the first half of 2014, which reached a total of 4,853 (1,564 killed and 3,289 wounded), recording a 17 percent increase in civilian deaths and a 28 percent in civilians wounded in comparison to the first six months of 2013.¹² These figures are disconcerting especially as the Taliban make additional territorial gains—disputed reports suggest that the insurgents control large parts of the provinces in Kunduz¹³

⁸ Nishank Motwani, “Afghanistan’s Audacious Audit”, *Foreign Policy*, 14 July 2014, at http://southasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/07/14/afghanistans_audacious_audit [accessed 4 November 2014].

⁹ The United Kingdom formally ended its combat operations in Afghanistan and marked the occasion by handing over its largest military base, Camp Bastion, to Afghan National Security Forces on 26 October 2014. “UK ends Afghan combat operations”, *BBC News*, 26 October 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29776544> [accessed 4 November 2014].

¹⁰ Rod Nordland, “War Deaths Top 13,000 in Afghan Security Forces”, *The New York Times*, 3 March 2014, at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/04/world/asia/afghan-cabinet-releases-data-on-deaths-of-security-personnel.html?_r=0 [accessed 5 November 2014].

¹¹ According to icasualties.org, a website that collects data on war casualties, the total number of American lives lost in combat in Afghanistan is 2350 as of 5 November 2014. The loss of lives for all international forces (including Americans) as per the latter date is 3478. See, “Coalition Military Fatalities By Year”, at <http://icasualties.org/OEF/Index.aspx> [accessed 5 November 2014].

¹² “Afghanistan: Midyear Report 2014, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict”, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan, July 2014, p. 1 at http://unama.unmissions.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=m_XyrUQDKZg%3D& [accessed 5 November 2014].

¹³ Azam Ahmed, “Taliban are Rising Again in Afghanistan’s North”, *The New York Times*, 22 October 2014, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/23/world/asia/taliban-rise-again-in-afghanistans-north.html> [accessed 5 November 2014].

and Helmand¹⁴—and remain focussed on driving out the ANSF (and the small number of international military forces) and deposing the current Afghan government and any future ones that follow.

Preserving the gains of the last thirteen years is unlikely to be sustainable without the ongoing support of Afghanistan's Western coalition partners. Unlike Hamid Karzai, who refused to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the U.S., President Ghani kept his election campaign promise and signed the BSA with the U.S. a day after being sworn into office.¹⁵ Under the BSA, the U.S. (and perhaps a smaller contingent of coalition forces) will keep around 9,800 forces in Afghanistan until the end of 2016.¹⁶ The primary purpose of this force will be to train and equip the ANSF and to engage in counterterrorism operations.¹⁷ Equally important though, the signing of the BSA signifies that the new government is responsible and reliable to Afghans and its international partners, and it has secured key financial support by keeping its external partners committed to Afghanistan's security. However, due to the drastic reduction in U.S. and international combat forces, the scale and aim of operations beginning 2015 will be noticeably different.¹⁸ Moreover, the 2016 end date for this small residual force is still a date certain withdrawal as opposed to being conditions-based. This limited, although necessary support, only temporarily diminishes the fear

¹⁴ Rod Nordland and Taimoor Shah, "Afghans Say Taliban Are Nearing Control of Key District", *The New York Times*, 6 September 2014, at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/world/asia/afghanistan.html?_r=0 [accessed 5 November 2014].

¹⁵ Formally known as the "Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement Between The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and The United States of America", the full text of the BSA and the Status of Forces Agreement can be read here: <http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/article/texts-of-bilateral-security-agreement-and-status-of-forces-agreement> [accessed 4 November 2014].

¹⁶ However, critical gaps in the ANSF's capabilities such as medical-evacuations and an active and functioning army aviation unit and the Afghan Air Force, are unlikely to be operationalised in the next two years. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) released two letters in October 2014 related to the failed G222 aircraft program for the Afghan Air Force. Even though the U.S. Department of Defense spent US\$486 million to purchase 20 of the Italian-made aircraft, they could not meet operational requirements in Afghanistan. Consequently, 16 of these aircraft were destroyed in Kabul and sold for scrap metal at 6 cents per pound for about US\$ 32,000 in total. The remaining four aircraft are stored at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. See: "Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan", Letter to The Honorable Charles T. Hagel, Secretary of Defense, 3 October 2014, at http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/special%20projects/SIGAR-15-04-SP_IL_G222%20Disposition%20Notf%20Req_03Oct2014_Redacted.pdf [accessed 5 November 2014].

¹⁷ From the 9800 American forces that remain in Afghanistan in 2015, 2000 will be special operations forces and about 980 from these will be focused on counterterrorism missions. See: "Nominations Of Adm William E. Gortney, USN, For Reappointment To The Grade Of Admiral And To Be Commander, North American Aerospace Defense Command; Gen John F Campbell, USA, For Reappointment To The Grade Of General And To Be Commander, International Security Assistance Force/Commander, U.S. Forces Afghanistan; And LTG Joseph L. Votel, USA, To Be General and Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command", 10 July 2014, p. 22 at <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/14-62%20-%207-10-14.pdf> [accessed 5 November 2014].

¹⁸ The 9800 U.S. soldiers will be part of the up to 12,000 strong NATO mission classified as "Resolute Support", which replaces ISAF and thus ends Operation Enduring Freedom. See: "NATO reaffirms continued support to Afghanistan", North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 4 September 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_112458.htm [accessed 5 November 2014].

for Afghans about abandonment, plus, it is highly improbable that the Afghan military machinery could succeed where the U.S.-led ISAF mission has failed.

Within the context of Afghanistan's economic, political and security transitions, Kabul is leading efforts to foster regional cooperation amongst its near and far neighbours. The purpose of the "Heart of Asia" or Istanbul process is to formulate regional cooperation through confidence building measures which could be used to produce a regional solution for Afghanistan and the region's interlinking problems.

Regional Cooperation in the "Heart of Asia"

Prior to the "Heart of Asia" or Istanbul Process, the first signs of a regional approach to stabilize the conflict in Afghanistan emerged towards the end of the then U.S. President George W. Bush's administration. It was, however, the incoming Obama administration (in 2009) which began articulating a regional approach that added new dimensions to the official policy discourse.¹⁹ For instance General James Jones, the U.S. National Security Advisor at the time claimed that "the 'Af-Pak' strategy review emphasized the fact that we have several countries, but we have one theater."²⁰ The notion of a regional approach made its international debut at the London Conference on Afghanistan in January 2010 in which the conference participants "underscored that regionally owned and steered initiatives stood the best chance of success."²¹ According to the former Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Marc Grossman, as consensus on regional cooperation gained traction, the goal he noted should be "to create a secure, stable, prosperous Afghanistan in a secure, stable and prosperous region."²² The merging of both Afghanistan and the region was necessary in his view to address the overlapping military, economic, political and psychological challenges. In addition, he noted that it was time for the region to take ownership of the challenges in Afghanistan.

Kabul's regional diplomatic initiative has been underway since November 2011.²³ Its stated goals are designed to forge cooperation across six confidence-building

¹⁹ General David Petraeus, who at the time was U.S. Central Command Commander, commented in early January 2009, "It's not possible to solve the challenges internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges, especially in terms of security, with Afghanistan's neighbors. A regional approach is required... We have to demonstrate commitment to sustain comprehensive, coordinated approaches and build and execute a regional strategy that includes Pakistan, India, the central Asian states and even the army in Russia along with, someday, perhaps at some point, Iran." See: Army Staff Sgt. Michael J. Carden, "Petraeus Discusses Way Ahead for Afghanistan", *American Forces Press Services*, US Department of Defense, 9 January 2009, at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=52604> [accessed 6 November 2014].

²⁰ Jim Garamone, "Hope for Future Highlights Afghanistan, Pakistan Talks", *American Foreign Press Service*, US Department of Defense, 7 May 2009, at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=54229> [accessed 6 November 2014].

²¹ Communiqué of the London Conference on Afghanistan, Lancaster House, 28 January 2010, at http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/factsheets/Documents_Communique%20of%20London%20Conference%20on%20Afghanistan.pdf [accessed 6 November 2014].

²² Author's interview with Ambassador Marc Grossman, 11 August 2014.

²³ The "Heart of Asia Countries" are comprised of: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the U.A.E. The "Supporting Countries" include: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, the European Union, France, Finland, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, U.K. and the U.S.A. In terms of the "Regional and International Organizations",

measures (CBMs) which include: (1) counter-terrorism, (2) counter-narcotics, (3) disaster management, (4) trade, commerce and investment, (5) regional infrastructure and finally, (6) in the field of education.²⁴ Since its inception, 19 regional technical group meetings have taken place at the CBM level, 11 at the ambassadorial level, 9 at the senior-official level, and 3 at the ministerial level in Kabul, Almaty and most recently in Beijing on October 31, 2014.²⁵ In its short three-year existence, the forum has managed to bring together a variety of states, some with hostile relations, which hitherto have had limited interactions with each other. Consequently, maintaining a platform for regional engagement is indeed an achievement,²⁶ however due to the multiplicity of interstate competitions and entrenched rivalries, the lofty goals for regional cooperation are at best a chimera.

Although well intentioned, the problem with the Istanbul process (and other initiatives) is its failure to appreciate the structural, contextual and cognitive challenges that impede the procuring of a regional solution. The interplay of these factors has meant that Afghanistan is an arena in which its neighbours fight out their regional rivalries, thereby trapping the landlocked country in a transnational struggle. Moreover, neither Afghanistan nor any of the regional initiative's member states have articulated a strategy that can overcome competing notions of regional stability and strategic rivalries, entrenched mistrust and fears, and the surfeit of state and non-state spoilers that amplify fraught historical relations. The presence of these impediments arguably resigns the "Heart of Asia" process to a hollow platform due to the toxic relations amongst several of the states, which primarily centre on Pakistan. This makes the pursuit of a grand political solution through regional diplomatic efforts essentially stillborn.

The ties constituting a state's structural, contextual and cognitive composition is intrinsic to its political disposition, preferences and perceptions. The cumulative effect of these layers of challenges (and impediments for a regional solution) has established a region premised on insecurities, and one factor from each of the three layers will be examined in this paper: (1) the promotion of strategic interests from the structural layer, (2) the impact of nuclear deterrence in the context of India-Pakistan relations on the region from the contextual layer, and (3) the notion of "ideological

these consist of: The UN, AKDN, CAREC/ADB, CICA, CSTO, ECO, NATO, OIC, OSCE, SAARC and the SCO. See: "Heart of Asia Countries", at <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/home/heart-of-asia-countries/> [accessed 4 November 2014]; "Supporting Countries", at <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/home/supporting-countries/> [accessed 4 November 2014]; "Regional and International Organizations", at <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/home/regional-and-international-organizations/> [accessed 4 November 2014].

²⁴ "Istanbul Process: A New Agenda for Regional Cooperation in the 'Heart of Asia'", 'Heart of Asia' Ministerial Conference – Kabul, Conference Declaration, 14 June 2012, at <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/14.-June-Declaration.pdf> [accessed 4 November 2014].

²⁵ "Meeting & Conferences", Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process, at <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/meeting-conferences/> [accessed 4 November 2014].

²⁶ S Reza Kazemi, "Will the 'Heart of Asia' start beating? A review of the regional co-operation process", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 29 August 2014 at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/will-the-heart-of-asia-start-beating-a-review-of-the-regional-cooperation-process/> [accessed 4 November 2014].

fundamentalism”,²⁷ meaning how state’s perceive their counterparts based on “who they are” as opposed to “what they do” from the cognitive layer. Their interaction has precipitated the aggrandizement of a contagion of insecurity spreading beyond a single bilateral relationship to others in the region. Its common symptoms include the disavowal of the norm of non-intervention especially in the internal affairs and respect for another state’s territorial borders. In extreme cases, territorial sovereignty may be nothing more than illusory. The international military withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to heighten the insecurities amongst Afghanistan’s neighbours and external stakeholders with some exercising or claiming a larger role in the country’s post-withdrawal milieu.

The three layers provide a composite representation of the multitude of dynamics mixing with each other in bilateral as well as multilateral relations. The tripartite approach becomes particularly useful for investigating conflict persistence and entrenched competitive (either benign or malign) relations.

Structural impediment: Promotion of strategic interests

Afghanistan has often charged Pakistan and in particular its quest for “strategic depth” for undermining the country’s security and stability. The term “strategic depth” was first used by the former head of the Pakistan Army, General Mirza Aslam Beg, who served at the helm from August 1988-1992. He employed the concept to express a process through which perceptions and security orientations amongst certain nations could be realigned and converged as a means to resist external aggression from both within the region and from afar. Under this notion, Pakistan would impose its security priorities on Kabul and be in control of steering them jointly to achieve two objectives: (1) creating a subservient state that was dependent on and friendly to Pakistan, and (2) to weaken Afghanistan militarily to eliminate the irredentist threat it posed with respect to its non-recognition of the Durand Line. General Beg’s notion of strategic depth also aimed to link Iran and China with Pakistan and Afghanistan in a quadrilateral pact to enact “Strategic Defiance”,²⁸ an outcome of that process which would preclude adversaries from establishing a presence in a four-nation wide sphere of influence. This was primarily aimed at India but not exclusively. However, the trouble with this approach was that till date “strategic depth” in Pakistani strategic thinking has remained undefined. Consequently, there are competing notions of the concept even though it is widely recognised today as being a flawed and pernicious idea. Nonetheless, supporters of this concept have attempted to revive it and to redefine it in the current context of the international military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Based on my interviews in Islamabad with Pakistani diplomats, senior military officers, and academics in April 2014, it is accurate to say that “strategic depth” means different things to different people. Currently, it is framed as seeking political & economic depth in Afghanistan.²⁹ Another perspective is that the pursuit of strategic depth for the past three decades has led Pakistan to view Afghanistan in a

²⁷ The term and meaning of “ideological fundamentalism” was coined by Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler in Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2008.

²⁸ Mirza Aslam Beg, “Responding to Indo-US defence pact”, *Dawn*, 11 August 2005 at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1068188> [accessed 6 November 2014].

²⁹ Author’s interview with a retired army general from the Pakistan Army, Islamabad, April 2014.

securitised manner, a mode of linear thinking which it has not been able to change. The trouble with viewing strategic depth in a defensive manner is that it legitimises continued interference in Afghanistan's sovereign affairs. Since this concept was born on the back of a successful Afghan jihad against the former USSR, the dividends were instrumental in convincing Pakistan's political and civilian leaders to sustain this strategy. Their reasoning was that if the mujahideen could be used to evict a superpower's forces without a backlash, perhaps the same approach could be used to compel India out of Kashmir, or force New Delhi to the negotiating table, without triggering a costly conventional war. Without pause, the Pakistani military and the Inter Services-Intelligence Directorate (ISI) began using Afghanistan as a base to develop and nurture insurgents to challenge India's writ in Kashmir. Additionally, they established a wide range of their own training camps to exploit the internal uprising that led to the 1989 Kashmir insurgency, which caught the Indian military by surprise.

The pursuit of strategic depth in different forms has produced two conflicting results. On the one hand, it helped maintain an impression of a military power balance for Pakistan against India. On the other hand, it created the space for ideologically motivated violent extremist groups to take root inside the country. Although the latter was engineered to instrumentalise the use of armed state and non-state actors in furtherance of its foreign policy priorities, particularly in Afghanistan and in Indian Administered Kashmir, this void is now partly responsible for those organisations targeting its patron, which is the Pakistani state itself. Moreover, the persistence of this politico-military strategy was responsible for poisoning relations between Kabul and Islamabad and entrenching a deep sense of mistrust, which has lasted ever since its inception.

Kabul's official policy narrative relating to Pakistan's quest for strategic depth indicates the damage it has done to their relationship. For instance, the Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations, Zahir Tanin, described it as a "catastrophic adventure" and a "fundamental destabilization of Afghanistan" in reference to Pakistan's support of the Taliban from 1996-2001, which he points out "has lasted ever since."³⁰ These assertions are unsurprising as Pakistan's military continues to provide protection to the Taliban leadership led by Mullah Muhammed Omar and gives sanctuary to insurgents that are combating the U.S.-led coalition and the ANSF. Moreover, the failed peace talks in Qatar in 2013 demonstrated the ability of the Taliban to project a government in exile and undermine the legitimacy of President Karzai's government.³¹ Equally important, it revealed the failure of the 2009 U.S. military surge, which was designed to weaken the Taliban before commencing negotiations from a position of strength. However, it is arguable that the surge could have achieved those lofty results given that a timetable for their

³⁰ Zahir Tanin also remarked, "Pakistan used its 'strategic depth' policy within the framework of its rivalry with India to justify its attempts to become the dominant power in Afghanistan by funding and supporting extremist groups, including those currently comprising the Taliban." See, Zahir Tanin, "Afghanistan and the Region", in Wolfgang Danspeckgruber (ed.), "Petersberg Papers on Afghanistan and the Region", Liechtenstein Colloquium Report, Volume IV, 2009, p. 137.

³¹ Borhan Osman, "Who Played Havoc with the Qatar Talks? Five Possible Scenarios to Explain the Mess", 16 August 2013, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/who-played-havoc-with-the-qatar-talks-five-possible-scenarios-to-explain-the-mess/> [accessed 6 November 2014].

withdrawal was announced even before they were deployed.³² The debacle of that announcement is captured in a popular Taliban axiom, “NATO has all the watches, but we have all the time.”³³

The withdrawal of American-led ISAF forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 will leave Afghanistan as the Western forces found it, writes Carlotta Gall, with “a weak state, prey to the ambitions of its neighbors and extremist Islamists.”³⁴ Gall’s thesis on Pakistan’s complicity in the Afghan war is not new; rather it lays bare the magnitude of Pakistan’s involvement in the Afghan war. Her statement, “Pakistan, not Afghanistan, has been the true enemy”,³⁵ shows the bigger challenge for the Afghan government and the ANSF, especially in a post-ISAF milieu. Pakistan’s foreign policy elite and the military have committed themselves to achieving two fundamental objectives in Afghanistan. These not only contravene the latter’s sovereignty but also disregards the Heart of Asia’s mission for regional cooperation.

The first concerns the political settlement in Afghanistan and its impact on the stability of Pakistan. Pakistani officials stress that a political settlement in Afghanistan must not lead to an outcome that is insensitive to Pakistani state interests or causes resentment among Pakistani Pashtuns.³⁶ They fear that an unfavourable political settlement to the Afghan conflict in which the Pashtuns perceive themselves as losers might in fact catalyse an ethno-nationalist Pashtun movement on either side of the border.³⁷ The latter concern, however, has resulted in a disproportionate response from Pakistan’s military establishment to give it the *raison d’être* to exercise and maintain its leverage in Afghanistan.

The second concern voiced by Islamabad is that any future government in Kabul must not be hostile towards Pakistan and should not allow its territory to be used as a staging ground against Pakistan’s interests.³⁸ This applies to the ANSF and other regional actors but in particular to the U.S. and India. The US Navy SEAL raid that killed Osama bin Laden on 2 May 2011 in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad demonstrated the American military’s capability to conduct deep covert missions inside Pakistan from Afghanistan. The success of this mission caused significant alarm, anger, and anxiety in Pakistan and particularly in its military circles due to the

³² Matt Waldman, “System failure: the underlying causes of US policy-making errors in Afghanistan”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4, July 2013, p. 841.

³³ James Shinn, “NATO Has the Watches, We Have the Time: Unless the U.S. shows resolve, the Taliban will simply wait us out”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 October 2009, at <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704335904574497120548934550> [accessed 6 November 2014].

³⁴ Patrick Cockburn, “Double Game, ‘The Wrong Enemy’ by Carlotta Gall”, *The New York Times*, 25 April 2014, at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/books/review/the-wrong-enemy-by-carlotta-gall.html?_r=0 [accessed 6 November 2014].

³⁵ Carlotta Gall, “A Reporter Analyzes the Driving Role of Pakistan in the Afghan War”, *The New York Times*, 9 April 2014, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/10/books/the-wrong-enemy-by-carlotta-gall.html> [accessed 6 November 2014].

³⁶ Yusuf, Moeed, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, “Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan’s Foreign Policy Elite”, *Jinnah Institute, A Jinnah Institute Research Report*, 2011, pp. 20-23.

³⁷ Yusuf, Moeed, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, “Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan’s Foreign Policy Elite”, p. 20.

³⁸ Yusuf, Moeed, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, “Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan’s Foreign Policy Elite”, p. 12.

fear of a future military operation directed against its nuclear arsenal.³⁹ Similarly, Pakistan fears that a sustained Indian presence in Afghanistan could be detrimental to its security and that New Delhi could support the insurgency in the restive province of Balochistan. The reopening of the Indian consulates in Afghanistan led Pakistan to accuse India of using its diplomatic posts as staging grounds for terrorist and disruptive activities inside Pakistan.⁴⁰ Pakistan's assertions of Indian meddling in Balochistan have been strongly rejected by India.⁴¹ Moreover, if there was any evidence to support these allegations, it is likely that Western intelligence agencies would have publicly made those charges, and the fact that not a single charge has been made in over thirteen years, indirectly confirms Pakistan's paranoia thereby exonerating India's name. Nonetheless, these assertions underscore Pakistani concerns and identify its insecurities, however both of these are framed on paranoia as opposed to being evidence-based.⁴²

Pakistan's security establishment and the country's foreign policy elite perceive the two countries' security as interlinked, consequently imposing their security-centric priorities on Kabul without much hesitation. Promoters of the Heart of Asia are intimately familiar with Pakistan's security meddling in Afghanistan, however, due to the fragility (and infancy) of the regional framework, they have failed to articulate the range of challenges originating from their neighbour. Consequently, the CBM on counterterrorism is mostly ineffective and silent on Pakistan's well-known and harmful role towards Afghanistan.⁴³ Despite this omission, the CBM aims to deal with terrorism in a "multipronged, comprehensive, and regional collaborative approach to the mutual interest of all participating countries and strengthened confidence and cooperation among them."⁴⁴ It is unclear how the latter can be operationalised when

³⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg and Marc Ambinder, "The Pentagon's Secret Plans to Secure Pakistan's Nuclear Arsenal", *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, 9 November 2011 at <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/the-pentagons-secret-plans-to-secure-pakistans-nuclear-arsenal/> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁴⁰ Khurshid Anwer Mirza, "Balochistan conspiracy", *The Nation*, 26 February 2012.

⁴¹ "Not India's Policy to Interfere in Baloch: FS", *Outlook India.com*, 5 December 2009.

⁴² On Pakistan's paranoia, John Mitton's article quotes Frédéric Grare of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace as saying, "According to Pakistan, whatever India does in Afghanistan is a ploy against Pakistan, be it economic investment, infrastructure, or any related matter...Thus, the reopening of Indian consulates in Afghanistan and the building of roads and other infrastructure have systematically been interpreted by Pakistan as conspiracies against its interests. As a result, Pakistan has ensured that Indian interests would be blocked whenever and wherever possible. It has refused, for example, to give India and Afghanistan transit rights to trade goods across Pakistan." In the same article, Mitton cites Steve Coll's example of an exchange between the Pakistani Army's Chief and the Head of the ISI in discussion with President Karzai in March 2010, to further emphasize Pakistan's obsession with India: "In March [2010], two Pakistani generals-Ashfaq Kayani, the Army chief, and Ahmed Pasha, the head of ISI-met with [Afghan president Hamid] Karzai in Islamabad, and signalled that they could help cool down the Taliban insurgency. In exchange, Kayani said, the Karzai government must 'end' India's presence in Afghanistan. According to a senior Afghan intelligence official, he said, 'There cannot be any type of Indian presence in Afghanistan-any type.'" See, John Mitton, "The India-Pakistan rivalry and failure in Afghanistan", *International Journal*, Vol. 69, No. 3, 2014, pp. 353-376, at p. 367.

⁴³ Frédéric Grare, William Maley, and Amitabh Mattoo, "Beyond the Great Game: Towards a National Political Process in Afghanistan Post-2014", *The Australia India Institute Chanakya Papers*, Australia-India Institute, The University of Melbourne, May 2014, pp. 1-30.

⁴⁴ "Draft Implementation Plan Concept for the Counter Terrorism Confidence Building Measure", Istanbul Process: A New Agenda for Regional Cooperation, 18 September 2012,

Pakistan's foreign policy elite and the military are the most prominent actors in subverting Afghanistan's security and stability.

Contextual impediment: Nuclear deterrence in the context of India and Pakistan

The overt nuclearisation of India and Pakistan in May 1998 did not come as a big surprise to either country. In essence, one of the sources for India's nuclear weapons program started with China's first nuclear test in 1964, which was only two years after India's humiliating defeat in the Sino-India war. Despite these setbacks, India tested a nuclear device (and not a weapon, meaning it could not be deployed) a decade later in 1974 to demonstrate its technical capacity. The testing of a non-deployable nuclear device signalled New Delhi's intent of weaponising its nuclear program to the international community as a means to protect its national security interests. Moreover, it was also designed to prevent India from being coerced into acceding to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The latter was seen as a discriminatory instrument being advanced as a Cold War arms control measure, although without any indication that those who already possessed nuclear weapons had any interest of moving towards nuclear disarmament.

For Pakistan, three key events shaped its nuclear trajectory. First, Pakistan's defeat against India in their 1971 war exposed its conventional inferiority as the war led to the loss of East Pakistan and the creation of the independent state of Bangladesh. It also blew the myth held by many Pakistanis about a long held-illusionary belief of military prowess against India. Second, the then Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto maintained a firm conviction that only nuclear weapons could guarantee the safety and survival of Pakistan. In a fascinating account by Pakistani Brigadier Feroz Khan, (retired) who spent much of his career in the Strategic Plans Division, the primary body that manages the operation, maintenance, and security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons stockpiles, he notes that Bhutto was in favour of Pakistan embarking down the nuclear weapons path as early as in 1965 (almost a decade before India's nuclear device test).⁴⁵ It was in that year that Bhutto famously used the metaphor of "eating grass" to justify Pakistani nuclear acquisition and to garner public support after its military misadventure against India in the 1965 war.⁴⁶ Thirdly, the

at <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Counter-Terrorism-CBM-Implementation-Plan.pdf> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁴⁵ Feroz H. Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

⁴⁶ Pakistan's strategy of employing asymmetric warfare first surfaced in 1948 when it sent in tribal *lashkars* and the Pakistan Army to annex the accession of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir to India. Similarly, in August 1965, Pakistan employed militants to infiltrate into Indian-controlled Kashmir. The objective of the campaign was to instigate an uprising against India-rule and seize Kashmir. This was to be followed by a Pakistani conventional military assault to support the insurrection and cement its hold over the captured territory. The Pakistani plan presumed widespread Kashmiri discontent with Indian rule and a pro-Pakistani leaning. However, this working assumption proved to be fatally misguided and costly, as local Indian Kashmiris immediately alerted Indian authorities to the presence of the infiltrated militants. Despite the failure of the first stage in Pakistan's military strategy, its leaders still pressed ahead and launched a full-scale conventional military assault, which resulted in the second war between India and Pakistan. Similar to the result of the first India-Pakistan war, this conflict ended in a stalemate with both parties agreeing to return to the status quo as per the Soviet-brokered Tashkent Agreement of 1966. See: Sumit Ganguly, "Deterrence Failure Revisited: The Indo-Pakistani Conflict of 1965", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4,

asymmetry between Pakistan and India meant that Islamabad needed external actors to balance against New Delhi.⁴⁷ It found a partner in China,⁴⁸ which according to Brigadier Khan supplied critical technology and materials to assist Pakistan in building its own nuclear program and eventually its nuclear deterrent. Brigadier Khan notes that China supplied Pakistan with 15 tonnes of uranium hexafluoride gas needed to create highly enriched uranium in its centrifuges for bomb making, as well as 50Kgs of Highly Enriched Uranium to build a bomb, and “even a crude bomb design purported to be a copy of China’s fourth nuclear test in 1966.”⁴⁹ The development of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capability has meant that it could sponsor an insurgency in Kashmir and commit acts of terrorism in India (and against Indian interests in Afghanistan)⁵⁰ in the belief that its nuclear deterrent would be sufficient to deny the Indian military from responding because of the fear of hostilities escalating to the nuclear level. The late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto captured this reasoning when she stated, “the Pakistani government realised that it could now provide extensive support for a low-scale insurgency in Kashmir while insulated from a full-scale Indian response.”⁵¹

The recent upsurge in ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LoC) dividing Kashmir and the India-Pakistan international border is beginning to chip away at the veneer of relative stability in place for the past decade.⁵² The stall in bilateral relations has brought back into focus the insecurities between the two

January 1990, pp. 77-93; Russell Brines, *The Indo-Pakistani Conflict*, New York: Pall Mall, 1968; Julian Schofield and Reeta Tremblay, “Why Pakistan Failed: tribal focoism in Kashmir”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, March 2008, pp. 23-38, at p. 28.

⁴⁷ S.M. Burke and Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 361.

⁴⁸ Yaacov Vertzberger, *The Enduring Entente: Sino-Pakistan Relations, 1960-1980*, New York: Praeger, 1982, pp. 24-29.

⁴⁹ Feroz H. Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 157.

⁵⁰ The U.S. Department of Defense gave a blunt assessment of militant safe havens in Pakistan in its latest October 2014 report. The report had this to say, “Afghan-and Indian-focused militants continue to operate from Pakistan territory to the detriment of Afghan and regional stability. Pakistan uses these proxy forces to hedge against the loss of influence in Afghanistan and to counter India’s superior military. These relationships run counter to Pakistan’s public commitment to support Afghan-led reconciliation. Such groups continue to act as the primary irritant in Afghan- Pakistan bilateral relations.” See, “Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan”, United States of America, Department of Defense, Report to Congress, October 2014, p. 95 at http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Oct2014_Report_Final.pdf [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁵¹ S. Paul Kapur, “Ten Years of Instability in Nuclear South Asia”, *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Fall 2008, pp. 71-94, p. 75.

⁵² “At least one killed, 12 injured in Pak-India cross border firing”, *Dawn*, 8 October 2014, at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1136594/at-least-one-killed-12-injured-in-pak-india-cross-border-firing> [accessed 6 November 2014]; “40 BSF Posts Targeted in Fresh Firing by Pakistan in Jammu”, *NDTV*, 7 October 2014, at http://www.ndtv.com/article/cheat-sheet/40-bsf-posts-targeted-in-fresh-firing-by-pakistan-in-jammu-602864?utm_source=ndtv&utm_medium=top-stories-widget&utm_campaign=story-1-http%3a%2f%2fwww.ndtv.com%2farticle%2fcheat-sheet%2f40-bsf-posts-targeted-in-fresh-firing-by-pakistan-in-jammu-602864 [accessed 6 November 2014]; “Another major ceasefire violation by Pakistan: 40 BSF posts attacked”, *The Times of India*, 25 August 2014, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Another-major-ceasefire-violation-by-Pakistan-40-BSF-posts-attacked/articleshow/40863148.cms> [accessed 6 November 2014]; Imran Sadiq, “Two Pakistanis killed, four Indians wounded in exchange of fire along border”, *Dawn*, 11 August 2014, at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1124645> [accessed 6 November 2014].

nuclear-armed neighbors. The last major terrorist attack in India was almost six years ago and Pakistan's alleged complicity in the 2008 Mumbai siege cooled bilateral ties from which they have not since recovered.⁵³ Although India exercised restraint in the aftermath of the Mumbai siege, there is no doubt that should the political green light come through for the Indian military to take action in response to future Pakistani aggression, that it would have regional implications going beyond Afghanistan.

India's strategic community⁵⁴ is increasingly presenting a view that Pakistan's first strike posture,⁵⁵ including its tactical nuclear weapons,⁵⁶ does not preclude New Delhi from initiating military operations in response to aggression traced back to Pakistan.⁵⁷ In fact, India's silence, militarily speaking, in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks has continued to haunt Indian policymakers for two reasons. One is that India did not respond to such blatant aggression, which made it look timid in the eyes of its own people. The second reason is that inaction emboldened Pakistan and its belief that it deterred India. India's restraint was applauded globally, but the lesson the international community and Pakistan learned was that nuclear deterrence had worked. Within Indian decision-making, however, the threat of conventional hostilities escalating to the nuclear level was not shared across the board.⁵⁸ Some argued for the employment of precision strikes, one of which was hitting known operational terrorist training camps in Pakistan. The primary objective of an overt military response was in fact the political objective, meaning that India would demonstrate its resolve by responding to egregious acts of violence committed against it. India would no longer stay silent.

⁵³ "Rewards for Justice – Lashkar-e-Tayyiba Leaders Reward Offers", U.S. Department of State, 3 April 2012, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/04/187342.htm> [accessed 6 November 2014]; Mehreen Zahra-Malik, "Pakistan 'charity' JuD front for banned militants: U.S.", *Reuters*, 26 June 2014, at <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/06/26/us-pakistan-jud-lashkar-idINKBN0F1QWX20140626> [accessed 6 November 2014]; Barney Henderson, "Mumbai terror attacks: the making of a monster", *The Telegraph*, 12 April 2013, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/9985109/Mumbai-terror-attacks-the-making-of-a-monster.html> [accessed 6 November 2014]; "Q No. 3874 Delay in Mumbai Terror Attack Case", Ministry of External Affairs, 14 August 2014, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/23918/Q+NO+3874+DELAY+IN+MUMBAI+TERROR+ATTACK+CASE> [accessed 6 November 2014]; Sebastian Rotella, "David Headley, witness in terror trial, ties Pakistani spy agency to militant group", *The Washington Post*, 23 May 2011, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/david-headley-witness-in-terror-trial-ties-pakistani-spy-agency-to-militant-group/2011/05/23/AFEeb99G_story.html [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁵⁴ The remainder of this section has been adapted from the author's article in *Foreign Policy*, see: Nishank Motwani, "Searching for a Response: India's Muddled Strategy on Pakistan", *Foreign Policy*, 8 October 2014, at http://southasia.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/08/searching_for_a_response_india_s_muddled_strategy_on_pakistan [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁵⁵ Michael Krepon, "Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons", *Stimson*, 24 April 2012, at <http://www.stimson.org/spotlight/pakistans-tactical-nuclear-weapons/> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁵⁶ Shashank Joshi, "Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Nightmare: Déjà vu?", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Summer 2013, pp. 159-172.

⁵⁷ Walter C. Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine", *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Winter 2007/08, pp. 158-190.

⁵⁸ Author's interviews with senior retired and serving Indian military officers, New Delhi, March-June, 2014.

The argument in favour of conducting military strikes in response to Pakistani belligerence is still in cold storage. However, the proponents who have called for initiating “Proactive Military Operations” (also known as the Cold Start Doctrine)⁵⁹ have argued that the risk of escalation to the nuclear level is low. But why?

Firstly, New Delhi believes that the Pakistani military leadership’s most potent weapon is denial, which has been instrumentalised to the strategic level. What this interpretation has signified is that Pakistan’s military presents itself in inverted terms. Put differently, despite being a rational actor, the image Pakistan projects of itself, according to a retired Indian army corps commander, is the “rationality of being irrational.” Thus it justifies behaviour that is unjustifiable to induce fear and policy-lock in New Delhi and beyond.

Secondly, there is a belief in New Delhi that Pakistan’s red lines for the use of nuclear weapons, however ambiguous, would not be low enough despite its posturing. This gap has therefore created room for limited conventional war. For India, the net benefit of conducting military operations would mean Islamabad’s red lines would have been put to the test, and this would tear open a space for limited conflict even under nuclear conditions. Such an outcome would give India the space to exercise military operations to counter future aggression, which would also undermine the nuclear shield that Pakistan has stood behind for so long. One key caveat worth noting is that no Indian military operation should cause excessive panic as that might come too close to breaching Pakistan’s red lines. What this means is that India would need to manage escalation and signal its limited objectives as a means to contain and eventually diffuse the crisis. Undoubtedly, both are incredibly complex tasks and bear tremendous risks, yet in spite of these dangers, voices calling for a military response to aggression have been gaining steady traction.

It is unknown whether arguments in favour of military operations have surpassed those calling for restraint. What is certain however is that it would be extremely costly for India’s newly elected Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to tolerate large-scale acts of terrorism. The latter holds true because the public discourse in India has exhausted its patience over Pakistan’s persistent violent behaviour, and is thus prepared to bear the costs of conflict, limited or otherwise.

A significant fallout between India and Pakistan has the potential of imperilling the security and stability of Afghanistan and other regional countries. Pakistan’s persistent revisionism and acts of terrorism against India (and its interests in Afghanistan) have impelled India’s political and military elite to jettison its policy of restraint, and to replace it with firm militarily responses to aggression. An escalation of tension between the two historic rivals is highly unlikely to be contained or lowered through regional institutions. Moreover, as their rivalry amplifies, its impact would be felt in Afghanistan, given their established competition in that country (but carried out in distinct ways), thus limiting or even nullifying the project of the Heart of Asia. The context of India-Pakistan relations, which has been characterised by a history of conflict, cannot be ignored when pursuing regional cooperation. Therefore, the prospect of the Istanbul Process generating any meaningful cooperation looks illusory, unfortunately.

⁵⁹ Ali Ahmed, “India’s Limited War Doctrine: The Structural Factor”, *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, IDSA Monograph Series No. 10, December 2012, at <http://www.idsa.in/system/files/Monograph10.pdf> [accessed 6 November 2014].

Cognitive impediment: Ideological fundamentalism

The term “ideological fundamentalism”⁶⁰ is useful in determining how politicians and military elites perceive their counterparts. The cognitive effects of ideological fundamentalism involve the settling of a state’s dilemma of interpretation on how to decode the polity and society of a competitor state. Resolving this dilemma of interpretation is particularly relevant because it can confer an enemy image to others based on “what the other *is*—its political identity—rather than how it actually behaves.”⁶¹ Assigning enemy status on the basis of another state’s character and not on its actions, motives or intentions, creates an inherent malign image which not only assimilates all information to that image but rejects the possibility of information that could alter or invalidate it.⁶² In profound cases, when a state sees its counterpart in ideological terms and not on the merit of its actions, the enemy image that has been created is radically entrenched and seldom can be done to address its counter fear. In such occurrences, the amalgamation of ideologically created (and projected) narrow worldviews and fear impel actors to perceive their counterparts’ intentions, motives and actions as inherently evil. In extraordinary cases, the enemy image also extends to that state’s society which intensifies its presumed malevolence. In either instance of whether the state itself is seen as evil or that designation includes its society, both are responsible for producing an existential threat for the actor interpreting his counterpart on ideological grounds. The amplification of ideological fundamentalism can impel states to a condition of conflict persistence and convert them into extraordinary enemies.

Beneath the strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, their enmity is an example of ideological fundamentalism in operation in South-West Asia. Riyadh’s ideological interpretation of Tehran’s polity and society has conferred upon it an enemy image, which largely stems from the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. The latter is most prolific in Riyadh’s unambiguous animosity towards adherents of Shiism and how this fundamental split in Islam is used to portray Iran and Shia Muslims as heretics deserving punishment and permanent ruin. The systemic changes resulting from the Islamic Revolution in 1979 has meant that Iran is militarily stronger today despite the structural choke around its economy. A senior Iranian diplomat whom I interviewed in Tehran remarked that the six-nation GCC (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf) states only possess “pseudo-strengths”, meaning two things: (1) they lack the experience, capacity and capabilities to confront Iran directly or indirectly in spite of their vast spending power, advanced military kit, and the most important factor, the U.S. as their external security guarantor, and (2) the GCC’s creation in response to the Iranian revolution resulted in the establishment of a “nest” of bases (12 out of 15 countries are U.S. allies or have bases where the U.S. military is based) around Iran.⁶³ The strategy to encircle Iran has failed to contain or shrink its political terrain in the region. Although the GCC countries are organised under the principle of “collective security”, they lack the confidence in meeting the challenges

⁶⁰ The term and meaning of “ideological fundamentalism” was coined by Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler in Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2008.

⁶¹ Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics*, p. 65.

⁶² Nicholas J. Wheeler, “Trust-Building in International Relations”, *South Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, Vol. 4, No .2, Winter 2012, pp. 1-12 at p. 5.

⁶³ Author’s interview with Iranian diplomats in Tehran, May 2014.

borne out of a rising Iran, as they have failed to prevent Tehran from growing into a strategic regional player from Lebanon to Afghanistan.

In the fifteen years since Iran came close to conflict with a Taliban run Afghanistan, Tehran maintains a strong national interest in seeing its eastern neighbour stable. The drawdown of U.S.-led ISAF forces by December 2014 and the relative gains the Taliban appear to be making in Afghanistan territorially, and in its political landscape, serves to caution Iran's politico-military elite on the potential challenges of a Taliban return. For instance, during the Taliban regime, Saudi Arabia was only one of three countries along with the UAE and Pakistan to have recognised the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. While the Taliban were in power, tensions between Iran and the Taliban peaked in August-September 1998 on the back of two incidents: (1) when Taliban fighters massacred thousands of Hazaras (a Shi'a ethnic minority) men and boys during their capture of the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif,⁶⁴ and (2) when Taliban fighters executed 9 Iranian diplomats posted to their consulate also in Mazar-i-Sharif.⁶⁵ These incidents led Iran to mobilize its armed forces which nearly culminated in the declaration of war on the Taliban.⁶⁶ Should hostilities have broken out, Saudi Arabia and the GCC block of countries stood a historic opportunity to gain, but as we know this did not occur.

The recent border skirmishes between Iran and Pakistan is a symptom of broader underlying problems that relate to regional competition. On October 8, 2014, four Iranian police officers were killed in Iran's impoverished province of Sistan and Baluchestan and the group that took responsibility, Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice and a successor to Jundullah),⁶⁷ is an ethnic Baloch and Sunni group who claim to be fighting for the rights of the people in Balochistan.⁶⁸ Tehran has long argued that elements within Pakistan, with support from Arab states in the Persian Gulf, support the group as leverage against Iran.⁶⁹ In response, Iran conducted a cross-border raid into Pakistan⁷⁰ in pursuit of anti-Iranian militants which resulted in the killing of a

⁶⁴ "Afghanistan: The massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif", *Human Rights Watch*, November 1998, Vol. 10, No. 7, at http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/afghan/Afrepor0.htm#P35_500 [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁶⁵ Douglas Jehl, "Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats' Deaths", *The New York Times*, 11 September 1998 at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/11/world/iran-holds-taliban-responsible-for-9-diplomats-deaths.html> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁶⁶ Douglas Jehl, "Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats' Deaths", *The New York Times*, 11 September 1998, at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/11/world/iran-holds-taliban-responsible-for-9-diplomats-deaths.html> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁶⁷ The U.S. declared Jundullah as a terrorist organisation in November 2010. See, Laura Rozen, "U.S. designates Jundullah as terrorist group", *Politico*, 3 November 2010 at http://www.politico.com/blogs/laurarozen/1110/US_designates_Jundullah_as_terrorist_group.html [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁶⁸ "Police Chief: Investigations Underway on Saravan Incident", *Farsnews*, 9 October 2014, at <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930717000797> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁶⁹ Alex Vatanka, "Iranian-Pakistan border incident reveals deeper problems", *AlMonitor*, 24 October 2014, at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/iran-pakistan-border-gas-pipeline.html#> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁷⁰ Iranian Brigadier General, Hossein Salami, the deputy head of Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), warned that, "We are, in principle, against intervening in the affairs of any country, but if they fail to abide by their obligations we will have [no choice but] to act," adding that "Terrorists, wherever they may be, even on the soil of neighbouring countries, we will find them, and if they do not give up acts of terrorism, we will deal with them without reservation." See, "Iran again warns of crossing into Pakistan if border is not

Pakistani Frontier Corps soldier.⁷¹ Although both sides have diffused the spike in tensions, Iran is closely watching the border and the deepening of strategic ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Tehran is suspicious that incidents along the border with Pakistan could energise elements in the Sunni entente who see Iran as the common regional enemy. The ideological underpinnings of the strategic rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran may push Islamabad to back the Saudis in its competition against Iran's regional ambitions. Moreover, Riyadh's anger at the U.S. for entering into serious talks with Iran over the latter's nuclear program has been perceived in the Royal Court as a betrayal of an old ally.⁷² The Kingdom has been threatening its American allies that Washington's overtures to Iran would fashion a "major rift" in its relations between them, and this has disclosed Riyadh's hawkish stance on a détente on U.S.-Iran relations.⁷³ Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Iran views Riyadh and Islamabad's theocratic and strategic convergence as an entry point for Sunni Arab states to challenge its stability and security both within Iran and where Tehran has strong influence, for instance, in western Afghanistan.

The current drawdown of international combat forces has positioned Iran and Saudi Arabia on two separate footings. On the one hand, Tehran is deeply sceptical of the Taliban's peaceful overtures and believes that the Taliban cannot be reconciled.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the view from Tehran is that the Taliban will demand more political influence once integrated into the Afghan government.⁷⁵ Iran fears that political accommodation with the Taliban could undermine Afghanistan and give rise to Sunni extremism. On the other hand, Riyadh is comfortable and experienced in dealing with

secured", *The Express Tribune*, 17 October 2014 at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/776867/iran-again-warns-of-crossing-into-pakistan-if-border-is-not-secured/> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁷¹ Shezad Baloch, "Border violation: Iranian cross-border firing kills FC official, injures three others", *The Express Tribune*, 17 October 2014 at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/777075/iran-trespases-into-pakistani-territory-kills-fc-official-injures-three-others/> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁷² Zvi Bar'el, "Arabian slights: Why the Saudis are angry about American Policies", *Haaretz*, 27 March 2014, at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.582473> [accessed 6 November 2014]; Roger Cohen, "Fury in the Kingdom", *The New York Times*, 28 October 2013 at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/29/opinion/international/cohen-fury-in-the-kingdom.html?_r=0 [accessed 6 November 2014]; Damien McElroy, "Iran nuclear deal: Saudi Arabia warns it will strike out on its own", *The Telegraph*, 25 November 2013 at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10472538/Iran-nuclear-deal-Saudi-Arabia-warns-it-will-strike-out-on-its-own.html> [accessed 6 November 2014]; "Report: Mossad working with Saudis on contingency plans for potential attack on Iran", 17 November 2013 at <http://www.jpost.com/Iranian-Threat/News/Report-Mossad-working-with-Saudis-on-contingency-plans-for-potential-attack-on-Iran-331961> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁷³ Amena Bakr and Warren Strobel, "Saudi Arabia warns of shift away from U.S. over Syria, Iran", *Reuters*, 22 October 2013 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/22/us-saudi-usa-idUSBRE99L0K120131022> [accessed 6 November 2014].

⁷⁴ Author's interview with Iranian diplomats in Tehran, May 2014.

⁷⁵ The possible return of the Taliban in some form could compel Afghanistan's current external partners—Iran, India, and Russia—to turn into limited spoilers. The absence of an international guarantor in Afghanistan from December 2014 is likely to encourage Pakistan to intensify its meddling as a means to reposition the Taliban at the helm of Afghan affairs. The combination of limited, greedy, and total spoilers threatens to undermine security and state-building processes. To read an analysis about the role and strategies of these stakeholders see, Nishank Motwani and Srinjoy Bose, "Afghanistan: 'spoilers' in the regional security context", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 2014, pp. 9-23 at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.958815> [accessed 6 November 2014].

the Taliban and could use it and other likeminded groups to establish a base in Afghanistan from which it could challenge Iran's influence inside Afghanistan and beyond. Riyadh and the Taliban share a distinct ideological convergence in terms of their puritanical interpretations of Islam which seeks to curb the presence of alternative worldviews. Saudi Arabia has consistently championed and proliferated Wahhabi-Salafi ideology of exclusion and supremacy, not only to protect its influence but also to counter its fears of losing its relevance to a resurgent Iran, which has challenged the Kingdom openly about its self-professed role as the leader of the global Islamic community.

The recent "thaw" in U.S.-Iran relations over the latter's alleged nuclear weapons program has inspired fear in the Arab states' leaderships. There is the fear of being abandoned by the U.S. for normalising ties with Iran. But looking ever deeper, a core concern is the recognition that not a single Arab state in the region (with the exception of Syria) provides for its own security without the backing of external assistance/support. Coming to terms with this reality is difficult and one tool used to bridge this divide is the framing and operationalisation of ideological narratives that serve to build soft power in its most pernicious sense. What has added more to Saudi Arabia's fears and frustration is its sense of helplessness to gain the upper hand in Syria. In contrast, Iran is proving adept at keeping the regime of Bashar al-Assad not only afloat but has been key in turning the tide in favour of the regime in the ongoing Syrian civil-war.

The ideological and strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has sharpened the sectarian Sunni-Shia divide. Riyadh has used its oil wealth and self-proclaimed leadership of the Sunni community of Muslim majority states to limit and isolate Iran within its region and to press Washington and other Western states to punish Tehran for its alleged nuclear weapons program. Moreover, Riyadh has instrumentalised the sectarian divide as justification for Iran's disintegration on the grounds of "who they are", meaning its religious identity, as opposed to "what they do". The framing of the rivalry in ideological terms has in effect sanctioned violence against Iran and adherents of Shiism located anywhere which has serious bearing on the Heart of Asia process. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are members of the Istanbul Process and their membership in the regional framework adds yet another layer of impediments to the agenda of regional cooperation. Riyadh's support for anti-Shia groups contravenes Kabul's pluralistic makeup and objectives for inclusivity and representation of all. As Riyadh endorses more anti-Iranian and anti-Shia rhetoric in its regional dealings, it is unfeasible for regional cooperation, let alone a regional solution, to get off the ground. The labelling of a member state as an enemy based on its internal character and not on its actions sets the foundation for endemic and enduring rivalry. Regional cooperation in such a toxic milieu will die prematurely and certainly not gain traction.

Conclusion

The interplay of the structural, contextual and cognitive layers of challenges between Afghanistan and its regional stakeholders disables the prospect for regional cooperation. The presence of deeply-entrenched, multiple overlapping and interlocking competitions and rivalries thwarts stakeholders from establishing mutual cooperation to decrease insecurities in the region. Afghanistan's weak institutions will be under significant pressure as a result of the international military withdrawal, which will present ideal conditions for state and non-state actors to increase their meddling in the widening political and strategic vacuum. The ripening of these

conditions enables states and their local partners to forge ever-increasing partnerships with other state and non-state actors to either challenge the writ of the Afghan government or to support it, thereby entangling Afghanistan into a multiplicity of local, regional and extra-regional trappings. The persistence of toxic agendas either framed strategically or ideologically, and/or borne out of contextual factors, means that the regional framework for cooperation has already become enmeshed in impervious rivalry. While it is laudable that the Heart of Asia process has brought together a range of stakeholders who have traditionally maintained limited contact, the dialogue process cannot overcome the surfeit of impediments.

Afghanistan will remain trapped in a transnational struggle until its state institutions can regain credibility, are seen as legitimate, and can project and preserve the sovereignty of the state. The latter also entails the ability of the ANSF to be the sole organ to possess the monopoly on coercive power. Moreover, international military engagement with the ANSF is a key requirement to prevent the Taliban from overthrowing President Ghani's government or establishing a parallel administration in territories under their control. Although the BSA commits a small number of U.S. forces (and possibly other Western allied countries) to remain in Afghanistan, their withdrawal at the end of 2016 would lift the only external barrier forestalling the collapse of the Afghan state to the Taliban. Protecting the gains of the last thirteen years, which have come at an enormous cost of blood and treasure, is imperative for Afghanistan's and the region's future.

The U.S. and its coalition partners can sustain the gains they have made in Afghanistan through a three-pronged strategy. Firstly, maintain a small but potent residual force that can train and advise the ANSF while also conducting counter-terrorism operations. Although counter-terrorism operations are tactically oriented, their impact can be felt at the strategic level of military strategy in Afghanistan. For instance, pursuing militants would demonstrate support for the Afghan government, sustain pressure on the Taliban, and help stave off Afghans' concern of abandonment and uncertainty. Secondly, continued military engagement in a counter-terrorism and advisory role is far more likely to encourage donors to meet their financial pledges made to Afghanistan. Furthermore, additional funding for Afghanistan is more likely to come through if the relationship between Kabul and its Western partners is underpinned by the imprimatur of continuing military engagement. Finally, for Afghanistan to project and preserve its sovereignty, enduring assistance on its overall state-building enterprise is essential. Failing to carry out this strategy will wash away the gains, lead to state collapse, and permit both state and non-state actors within and outside of Afghanistan to profit from its breakdown. Given the stakes, the delusion of regional cooperation will be priceless.