

Afghanistan

Security Situation and Prognosis

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When we went to war less than a month after the attacks of September 11, the objective was to destroy al-Qaeda and kill or capture its leader, Osama bin Laden, and other senior figures in the terrorist group and the Taliban, which had hosted them. Today, more than eight years later, we find ourselves fighting an increasingly lethal insurgency in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan that is led by many of those same extremists. Our inability to finish the job in late 2001 has contributed to a conflict today that endangers not just our troops and those of our allies, but the stability of a volatile and vital region.

Report to Senate Foreign Relations Committee,
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In 2011, President Barack Obama approved plans to draw down 10,000 US troops from Afghanistan during that year and another 23,000 in 2012. The withdrawal of the remaining combat troops is to be completed by 2014. Approximately 10,000 to 20,000 troops are likely to be left behind at Kabul, Bagram and Kandahar to provide training and logistics support and to continue the drone war against hardcore terrorists inimical to US interests.

The withdrawal will leave a security deficit in Afghanistan. There is no evidence at present that Washington and its allies are planning to help the Afghan government to maintain security by supplementing Afghan efforts through the deployment of a viable regional or international peacekeeping force under a UN flag after the NATO-ISAF military withdrawal is completed in 2014. The

willingness of regional actors to play a leading role in stabilising Afghanistan, rather than pursuing divergent national interests and disparate agendas, is also uncertain. Unless the Central Asian states, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Russia jointly contribute towards ensuring stability, Afghanistan is likely to fall to the Taliban again or even break up.

The present situation in Afghanistan is a stalemate at both the strategic and tactical levels. The ISAF strategy to “clear-hold-transfer-exit” is many years away from achieving its political and military goals. The fledgling Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP), which are expected over time to take over the responsibility for security from ISAF, are not yet equal to the task: their numbers are small; they lack experience and are inadequately trained; and, they are not capable of undertaking counterinsurgency operations autonomously. Hence, the planned withdrawal of ISAF will leave a security deficit.

While the ISAF forces control most of the large towns, the Taliban—together with the al-Qaeda—controls large swathes of the countryside. Governance is virtually non-existent outside Kabul. Though significant funds are being spent on socio-economic development by the Afghan government as well as by donors like India (the US alone has pumped in 56 billion dollars), the results have consistently fallen short of the country’s requirement. This is partly due to inadequate supervision and rampant corruption.

The New ‘Great Game’

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, still a perceptive observer of the emerging strategic environment, has written that four conditions must be met to make the exit strategy viable (“How to Exit Afghanistan”, *Washington Post*, June 8, 2011): “A cease-fire; withdrawal of all or most American and allied forces; the creation of a coalition government or division of territories among the contending parties (or both); and an enforcement mechanism.” None of the four conditions appears viable at present. Nor do these conditions look achievable in the 2014-15 time frame in which the exit strategy is planned to be completed. This is because the challenge posed by the Taliban and its affiliates in Afghanistan is extremely complex, democratic institutions have not yet taken root, governance is deficient, socio-economic development has not shaped up the way it had been hoped it would and the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police are not yet in a state of combat readiness that they can assume responsibility for security.

Strife in Afghanistan dates back to the upheavals of the 1970s. Some of the key actors in the present conflict, both Taliban and non-Taliban, owe their origins to the anti-Soviet resistance that was sponsored by the United States (US) government through the CIA, and its Pakistani counterpart, the ISI. Allies of the 1980s, these individuals [minus the recently deceased Osama bin Laden], are today's veritable adversaries in a high-stakes conflict that has destabilised the region and is reminiscent of the old 'Great Game'.² The lives of the Afghan people have been torn asunder and, in many respects, the country has been pushed back into the dark ages. While the writ of the Hamid Karzai government runs in Kabul, its efficacy in far-flung provinces remains a matter of debate.³ In the prevailing situation, where governance is virtually non-existent, efforts aimed at socio-economic development have been floundering, even though billions of dollars of aid has been poured in.⁴ Worse, the security environment shows little signs of improving in the short term.⁵

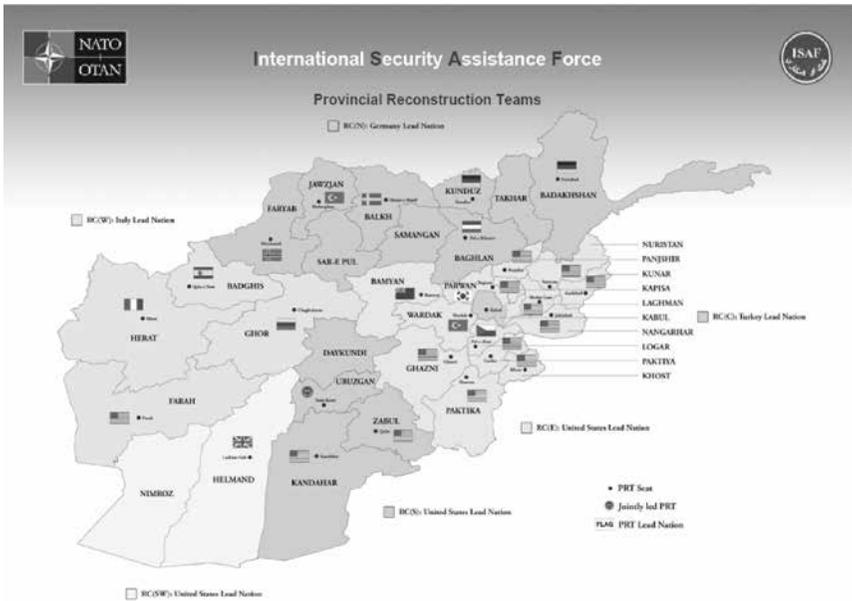
The present security situation in Afghanistan could best be described as a strategic stalemate. While the United States and its NATO-ISAF allies are not exactly losing the fight against the Taliban, they have failed to achieve their objectives of eliminating the al-Qaeda, defeating the Taliban and ensuring that the Afghan government is able to prevent the Taliban from returning to power by force. The US and its allies have for some time now been looking for a face-saving exit strategy, which some Western commentators have described, perhaps uncharitably, as "declare victory and move on."⁶

A review of the war strategy in Afghanistan was completed by the Obama administration in December 2010. The publicly released version of the report claimed major gains against the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, particularly in the core areas which have remained under their control for long, including the Helmand and Kandahar provinces. However, the report acknowledged that the gains were fragile and could be undone unless the Pakistan Army acted against the Taliban operating from safe havens in the Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa (the erstwhile NWFP) and FATA with equal vigour.⁷ Addressing the media at the White House, President Obama had said the US "will continue to insist to Pakistani leaders that terrorist safe havens within their borders must be dealt with."⁸ The American civilian and military leadership has been trying to convince Pakistan for some time now that eliminating safe havens for terrorists is as much in its own interest as it is in the interest of lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. The criticality of Pakistan in achieving overall success almost certainly means that a major increase in US drone strikes

against terrorists in the Khyber-Pakhtonkhwa and FATA can be expected, even though substantive ground operations across the Durand Line remain unlikely.⁹

The broad goal of the US-NATO-ISAF war strategy in Afghanistan is to ensure that Afghanistan acquires the stability necessary to control territory, so as to prevent the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other armed offensive groups (AOGs) from operating successfully from its soil against the US and its allies, and to reduce the risk of a return to civil war.¹⁰ Further, the comprehensive objective of the US and its NATO-ISAF allies is to prevent the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan from being used as breeding grounds for fundamentalist terrorism and as launch pads for terror strikes on the US and its allies. According to a Council for Foreign Relations (CFR) task force report, the US objective in Pakistan is, "To degrade and defeat terrorist groups that threaten American interests from its territory and to prevent turmoil that would imperil the Pakistan state and risk the security of Pakistan's nuclear programme."¹¹ The US also seeks to prevail on Pakistan to stop providing support to the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami and Pakistani terrorist organisations like the LeT and JeM. President Obama cannot afford to lose a war on his watch and yet hope to win re-election in 2012.¹² The US exit strategy will be based on a phased drawdown with not more than 10,000 troops being withdrawn each year till an "equilibrium that is manageable"¹³ is achieved. The US and NATO troops are still thin on the ground while the Taliban has shown a marked degree of resurgence. Negotiations with the so-called 'moderate' Taliban have also failed to acquire the necessary gravitas.¹⁴

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Provincial Reconstruction Teams

Source: NATO-ISAF, 16 May 2011, <http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/Placemats/16%20May%202011%20Placemat.pdf>, accessed on 22 May 2011.

Regional Concerns

To hear the Americans and Europeans talk, it's the beginning of the end game in Afghanistan. The United States and its allies are rushing for the exit. In Western capitals the discussion is all about troop withdrawals, political settlements, and negotiations with the Taliban. But that's only how the West sees it. The picture looks rather different from the vantage point of leaders in South Asia and the Middle East. Regional powers are gearing up for a period of renewed intrigue.¹⁵

Neither the international community, nor the Afghans themselves, ever devised a comprehensive plan detailing the reconstruction of the nation's economic and social institutions. In fact, the Coalition's policy of managing the relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours has always been from issue to issue, and has never been developed into a cogent regional framework.¹⁶ As a result, when it actually began, the policies of the international and the regional actors differed. While there is no denying that all of Afghanistan's neighbours

would benefit from its stability,¹⁷ they remain unsure, not without cause, of the international community's commitment. Until they are satisfied, they will develop their singular policies, oriented to protecting their own interests.

This security deficit can be filled only if Afghanistan's neighbours agree to accept the responsibility for providing security, including contributing troops to an UN-mandated peacekeeping force. However, Central Asian Republics (CARs), China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Russia have their own challenges and agendas that are at variance with the requirement. The Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, will be directly affected by instability in Afghanistan. Due to a persistent inadequacy of state capacity and military capability, these states can at best ensure that their territory is not used as safe haven by the Taliban. They could also continue to help with limited logistics support.

Afghanistan has emerged as a treasure trove of mineral deposits (estimates vary between 1 and 3 trillion dollars), but it is China that has benefited the most so far. For example, China signed a \$2.9 billion agreement with Kabul in December 2007 to extract copper from the Aynak deposit, which is estimated to contain 240 million tonnes of ore. Beijing maintains close strategic ties with Pakistan and may support Islamabad's continuing efforts to ensure the Taliban return to power. China is unlikely to join a UN peacekeeping force to stabilise Afghanistan as such a force will almost certainly be led by a US commander. However, China will not block the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) from seeking an amicable solution to the Afghan conflict.

India has historically had friendly ties with Afghanistan and wishes to see a stable government installed in Kabul that is neutral to both India and Pakistan. It has funded some major Afghan reconstruction and development plans, spending \$1.3 billion so far.¹⁸ It has recently committed another \$500 million. The funds have been spent on building the 218 km-long Zaranj-Delaram road linking the Iranian border with the Garland Highway, electric power lines including one from the CARs to Kabul, hydroelectric power projects, school buildings, primary health centres and the new building for the Afghan Parliament. India is also training Afghan administrators, teachers and officer cadets, but only within India. While at present there is no support in India for sending troops to Afghanistan, there

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is realisation that the fight against the Taliban and the al-Qaeda has long term security implications for India. With some effort, New Delhi could be persuaded to deploy up to one division (15,000 troops) to join a UN peacekeeping force provided Pakistan's sensibilities about Indian military presence in Afghanistan can be taken care of. The Indian approach is not tactical but long-term. India has been almost completely marginalised in discussions for the resolution of the ongoing conflict, due to the attention to Pakistan's 'sensibilities'. However, now the US is coming around to the view that India is a key stakeholder and without its involvement, a lasting solution to the conflict cannot be achieved.

Iran has followed a wait-and-watch policy since the US-led invasion in 2001. In 1998-99, it had massed 200,000 troops and Revolutionary Guards on its border with Afghanistan to prevent drug trafficking and protect its territorial integrity. Even now its troops are in stand-by mode close to Afghanistan's western border to prevent cross-border Taliban influence. Tehran is unlikely to join a UN peacekeeping force, and Washington will not want Iranian troops in such a force. However, the former may allow the use of the road from Chabahar port to Zaranj to open up a new route for logistics supplies, thereby reducing dependence on the two routes that pass through Pakistan's Quetta and Peshawar. In August 2012, Iran allowed the Taliban to open an office in Teheran.

Pakistan stands accused of having an equivocal stance on the international counter-insurgency campaign and providing a safe haven to the Taliban and al-Qaeda in FATA and Balochistan. Moreover, the military and security agencies, particularly the ISI, continue to seek 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan, with a view to limiting India's influence in Kabul and ensuring Pakistan has significant leverage in any future peace talks in Afghanistan. The ISI in particular fears talks being held on terms too favourable to Washington and Kabul, and is therefore unlikely to alter its stance.

Russia has not forgotten its humiliation in Afghanistan during its intervention of 1979-89 and will, therefore, not allow its troops to join a UN peacekeeping force. However, it would be inclined to play a positive role overall. Approximately 40 per cent of logistics supplies for the ISAF now transit via the Northern Distribution Network through Russia and Central Asia. At present Moscow does not allow the use of this route for lethal equipment. It may relent on this requirement and also allow the use of its air bases in Central Asia, provide refuelling facilities and help in search and rescue.

A good initiative was the summit organised by Turkey and held in Istanbul in January 2010. However, the fact that India was not involved in the discussion was a

mistake. Whether or not it was kept away on account of Turkey's sensitivity towards Pakistan, or if some of the other actors in the summit had a role to play, is beside the point. It will still be a worthwhile development if all the necessary actors, noted previously, were to be involved in future summits. The importance of Turkey as an important impartial arbiter in a regional approach towards Afghanistan cannot be overstressed. For one, given that it does not share a border with Afghanistan, there is a lack of animosity between the two countries. Second, Turkey was the second country to recognise Afghanistan in 1921 and has always maintained good relations with it; and, third, like Afghanistan, it is an Islamic country, which goes a long way towards fostering fruitful relations between the two. It has been involved in the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, from the very beginning, with a deployment of troops, and a civilian-PRT in the Wardak province. More recently, it has even conveyed that it is willing for the Afghan Taliban to open a representative office in Turkey, pursuant to the wishes of the Afghan government, to enable further the process of reconciliation.¹⁹ Therefore, it is clear that it enjoys the confidence of most [if not all] the key regional actors as also the larger international community and has the diplomatic wherewithal to engage with them in the necessary manner.

Therefore, it is in Afghanistan's long-term interest for all the protagonists to seek a regional solution to the Afghan conflict with the help of the CARs, China, India, Iran and Russia. This would involve, among other things, putting together a regional force, preferably under a UN flag, to provide a stable environment for governance and development, after the US and NATO-ISAF forces complete their draw down and before the Afghan National Army is in any position to fully take over. Such a force could be headed by a US General, as has been the case in South Korea for over 50 years, as the US is expected to leave behind 35,000 to 40,000 troops after 2014.²⁰

While at present there is no support in India for sending troops to Afghanistan, there is realisation that the fight against the Taliban and the al-Qaeda has long term security implications for India.



Safe havens, Sanctuary, Supply & Attack Zones²¹

US airstrikes against terrorists hiding in safe havens in Pakistan have intensified. These tactics will become the mainstay of the NATO-ISAF counter-insurgency campaign over the next few years unless the Pakistan army and the ISI abandon

their quest for strategic depth in Afghanistan and stop sheltering all varieties of terrorists while pretending to fight them. Overall, the situation in Afghanistan offers little cause for hope. The security environment is still fragile. Poor governance, political instability, ill-trained and badly equipped and poorly motivated Afghan security forces, rampant corruption, gross misuse of international aid, resurgent Taliban, lack of political and military will among several members of the coalition to continue the fight and Pakistan's continuing double game do not augur well for peace and stability. While President Obama's domestic political compulsions are understandable, militarily the time is not ripe to commence withdrawing forces from Afghanistan. In fact, what Afghanistan needs is another military surge in order to be able to hold cleared areas against the Taliban, rather than the thinning down of troops. The Taliban are fond of saying that the ISAF forces have the watches but they have the time. They are convinced that the US and NATO forces do not have the political will or the military staying power to last the course and they are biding their time for the foreign forces to quit.

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Prognosis

The current US and NATO-ISAF strategy does not inspire confidence amongst the Afghan people that the Coalition forces have the capability to stabilise Afghanistan. The Afghans see them as lacking sufficient knowledge about the insurgents, the tribal culture and customs of the region, or for that matter, the vagaries of the terrain in which they are deployed.²² The patience of the Afghan people has begun to wear out. This does not, however, imply that the Afghans would like the Coalition forces to leave. The belief that if the Coalition forces leave, the Taliban will stop fighting and the violence will end, is as mistaken as it is dangerous. The Taliban will overrun every bit of land that they can, not because they have the capabilities to do so, but because the Afghan government is currently not strong enough to resist them without the support of the Coalition forces.

Most importantly, it is the Taliban's and the Haqqani network's sanctuaries in Pakistan which merit suitable action. It is imperative that the Coalition forces work with the Afghan government and the regional powers to assure Pakistan that a strong and independent Afghanistan will not be a source of threat to Pakistan, either directly or indirectly. A hasty withdrawal without viable alternative security arrangements will lead to the return of the Taliban and contribute further to

regional instability. Instability in Afghanistan will fuel Islamist fundamentalist terrorism and assist the return of the al Qaeda. Western and regional players will need to accommodate Pakistan's core interests in seeking a lasting solution to the Afghan conflict.

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Notes

1. "Tora Bora Revisited: How we failed to get Bin Laden and why it matters today," *Report to Members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, 30 November 2009, http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Tora_Bora_Report.pdf, p. V, accessed on 01 December 2009.
2. The 'Great Game' refers traditionally to the competition between Russia and England in the 19th century, over Central Asian land routes for access to India and the Far East. See Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha America, 1994).
3. There are two dimensions to this issue. First, Karzai's authority is not being viewed as legitimate, and hence, ineffective. Second, power has never been exercised in direct, systematic chains of command in Afghanistan - allegiances have been between the ruler and the ruled, with the institutional state not being involved. While Karzai may not necessarily be unaware or ineffectual in this regard, this form of authority/power cannot be quantified in metrics of progress.
4. The aid situation in Afghanistan has never been transparent, and various stakeholders have expressed dissatisfaction with the model on different occasions. For instance, see Arnaud De Borchgrave, "Corruption Consumes Much Afghan Aid," *RAWA News*, 19 January 2011, <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2011/01/19/corruption-consumes-much-afghan-aid.html>, accessed on 20 May 2011; Glenn Kessler, "Clinton Calls Years of Afghan Aid 'Heartbreaking' in Their Futility," *The Washington Post*, 31 March 2009; "Press Release - Where Aid money goes," *Agency Co-ordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR)*, 05 March 2010, http://www.afghanaid.org.uk/news.php/17/acbar_press_release_where_aid_money_goes, accessed on 23 April 2011. For an analysis of the lacunae in the institutional model of aid and development in Afghanistan, see Homa Saleh, *The Institutional Setting of Foreign Aid: The Case of the Knowledge Problem in Afghanistan* (George Mason University, 2011), http://www.pubchoicesoc.org/papers_2011/Saleh.pdf, accessed on 23 April 2011.
5. For a trajectory of the state of security in Afghanistan, see Mohammad M Stanekzai, "Afghanistan: Not Lost, But Needs More Attention," *United States Institute of Peace*, June 2008, <http://www.usip.org/publications/afghanistan-not-lost-needs-more-attention>, accessed on 20 April 2011; Ron Synovitz, "Seven Years After First Air Strikes, Afghans Hope For Jobs, Peace," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 07 October 2008, http://www.rferl.org/content/Seven_Years_After_First_Air_Strikes_Afghans_Hope_For_Jobs_Peace_/1294737.html, accessed on 20 April 2011; "Afghanistan Security not Improving," *Associated Press*, 19 June 2010; "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and

- security - Report of the Secretary-General," *United Nations Security Council*, 09 March 2011, <http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/UNGA-S2011-120-SituationinAfghanistanandItsImplicationsforInternationalPeaceandSecurity.pdf>, accessed on 13 March 2011; Mohammad Hamed Kunduz, "Suicide blast kills powerful Afghan police chief," *Reuters*, 28 May 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/28/us-afghanistan-blast-idUSTRE74R11Z20110528>, accessed on 28 May 2011.
6. For instance, see Rick Holmes, "Declare victory and move on," *MetroWest Daily News*, 13 May 2011; Anatol Lieven, "Viewpoint: Bin Laden's death opens Afghan exit path," *BBC News*, 03 May 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-south-asia-13266128>, accessed on 04 May 2011.
 7. "Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review," *The White House - Office of the Press Secretary*, 16 December 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/overview-afghanistan-and-pakistan-annual-review>, accessed on 17 December 2010.
 8. "Statement by the President on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Annual Review," *The White House - Office of the Press Secretary*, 16 December 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/statement-president-afghanistan-pakistan-annual-review>, accessed on 17 December 2010.
 9. Although certain commentators may categorise it as such, 'Operation Geronimo' should not be construed as a 'substantive ground operation', notwithstanding the objectives it achieved.
 10. More often than not, the latter objective ends up almost as an afterthought, notwithstanding its occurrence in the past.
 11. Richard L Armitage, Samuel R Berger, Daniel Markey, *U.S. Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan - Independent Task Force Report No. 65*(New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, November 2010), p. 8.
 12. While his approval ratings certainly went up post-Op Geronimo, the fallout in relations with Pakistan would be enough to ensure that policy decisions on Afghanistan will take a 'dramatic' turn in the run-up to the 2012 elections.
 13. G Parthasarathy, "Debate over US AfPak policy," *South Asia Monitor*, 25 November 2010.
 14. See "Inside View of Taliban Underscores Afghanistan's Complexity," *PBS Newshour*, 14 August 2009, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/asia/july-dec09/taliban_08-14.html, accessed on 16 April 2011; and Peter Bergen, "Don't count on a peace deal with Taliban," *CNN*, 26 May 2011, <http://www.edition.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/05/24/bergen.taliban.talks/index.html>, accessed on 27 May 2011.
 15. Daud Khattak, "Regional Powers Gear Up For Afghan Intrigue - Even As West Looks Away," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 April 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/regional_powers_gear_up_for_afghan_intrigue_even_as_west_looks_away/16798710.html, accessed on 15 May 2011.
 16. "Afghanistan's other neighbours: Iran, Central Asia and China," *Conference Report – American Institute of Afghanistan Studies*, March 2009, http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/AIAS_AfghanistansOthersNeighbors_Iran_CentralAsia_China.pdf, accessed on 16 November 2009.
 17. Each of Afghanistan's neighbours – Pakistan, India, China, Russia, Iran – is threatened by one or the other aspects originating from Afghanistan, more so than the world is by the emergence of it as a base for international terrorism. Pakistan, by the Al-Qaeda; India by

- jihadism and terror groups; China by fundamentalist Shiite jihadist in Xinjiang; Russia by unrest in the Muslim south; Iran by the fundamentalist Sunni Taliban. Henry Kissinger, "Deployments and diplomacy," *Newsweek*, 12 October 2009.
18. For a detailed account of India's involvement in Afghanistan, see Ministry of External Affairs, India – Public Diplomacy Division, *Rebuilding Afghanistan: India at Work* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2010).
 19. "Turkey Says Willing to Host Afghan Taliban Office," *VOA News*, 12 April 2011, <http://blogs.voanews.com/breaking-news/2011/04/12/turkey-says-willing-to-host-afghan-taliban-office/>, accessed on 16 April 2011.
 20. David W Barno, Andrew Exum and Matthew Irvine, "Beyond Afghanistan: A Regional Security Strategy for South and Central Asia," *Center for A New American Security*, June 2011, p. 8, <http://www.cnas.org/node/6418>, accessed on 25 May 2011.
 21. *Source: Institute for the Study of War*, 06 January 2011, <http://www.understandingwar.org/map/safehavens-sanctuary-supply-attack-zones-current>, accessed on 20 April 2011.
 22. Conversation with MOFA (Afghanistan) representative, Vienna, 13 April 2011.