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International Cooperation on Afghanistan

Geopolitics and the Limits of Diplomacy

A. Farid Tookhy





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Objective

This paper examines the prospects for international cooperation for mitigating or resolving the political, security and economic crises in Afghanistan. It asks whether such cooperation is likely to materialize at the regional or international levels. The paper seeks to identify key actors, their interests, their interactions and the consequences of these for effective common action aimed at resolving the crisis in Afghanistan.

This analysis draws attention to the notion of a “security constellation”—the interplay among factors located at the domestic, regional, and global levels of analysis—and its implications for the emergence of a common international approach to the situation in Afghanistan. Evidence for supporting the arguments presented here has been drawn from both primary and secondary sources.



Security Council Meets on Situation in Afghanistan, September 2021. (UN Photo/Manuel Elias)

Recent Historical Context: The Search for a Common International Approach

The United Nations is the nexus of efforts to mobilize regional and global support for a concerted international response to the crisis in Afghanistan. Three years after returning to power in Kabul, the Taliban's government—which includes dozens of UN-sanctioned individuals at the highest levels—has not been recognized by a single other state; over two dozen terrorist groups operate inside Afghanistan; and the country faces a dire humanitarian situation. There has been a significant amount of ad hoc international engagement with the Taliban, but the situation in the country remains precarious. In June 2024, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Afghanistan remarked that the international community was still “in crisis management mode.”¹

In March 2023, the UN Security Council requested the Secretary General to conduct an assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and to provide “forward-looking recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach” among relevant actors in order to address the political, security and humanitarian crises in the country.² The UN-commissioned assessment report, which the Secretary General presented to the Security Council

in November 2023, warned that the situation in Afghanistan had reached an impasse and that ad hoc and reactive engagement by individual states with the Taliban would have “dire consequences for the Afghan people and the entire region.” The report also claimed that international stakeholders supported “engagement with Afghanistan and the development of a common international approach,” provided that such engagement is done “in a more coherent, coordinated and structured manner and with a clear understanding of the outcomes and commitments from all sides.”³

The UN assessment report proposed three mechanisms to support engagement with Afghanistan: the large group format of UN-hosted special envoy meetings; an international contact group, selected from and linked to the large group format, charged with continuous engagement with Afghan stakeholders; and a UN special envoy, tasked with facilitating engagement among international and Afghan stakeholders, leading coordination and connecting with the proposed and existing platforms.⁴ Importantly, the report notes that the overarching goal of the proposed concerted international effort should be “an Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbours and fully reintegrated into the international community.”⁵

What are the prospects for the development of a common international approach to the crisis in Afghanistan? How likely to succeed is the UN-initiated process which seeks to lay the groundwork for “coherent, coordinated and structured” engagement with Afghanistan? Is the end state of an Afghanistan “at peace with itself and its neighbors and

fully integrated into the international community” attainable?

Three major factors militate against the development of a common international approach to resolving the crisis in Afghanistan. First, despite their similar rhetoric, regional and international powers have competing interests and different priorities in Afghanistan. Second, major regional and global players have other strategic priorities and entanglements at the moment. Third, the current global geopolitical environment, characterized by the intensification of hostilities between western powers and some major powers in the region, hampers diplomatic initiatives aimed at creating international consensus on the way forward in Afghanistan, making those initiatives unlikely to succeed.

The Security Constellation

In order to understand the prospects for the emergence of a common international approach to the situation in Afghanistan, we must take into consideration the security constellation affecting the crisis in the country. “Security constellation” refers to the interplay among a complex set of factors that are situated at the domestic, regional, interregional and global levels.⁶ The Afghanistan security constellation refers to domestic, regional and global factors that together shape the actions and reactions of different actors involved in the situation in Afghanistan. Who are the major actors at these levels?

What are their interests? How do they interact? And what are the implications of these interactions for the crisis in Afghanistan and joint international action in response to it?

Despite the Taliban’s effective control over the territory of Afghanistan, a significant number of non-state actors continue to operate inside the country.

At the **domestic level**, despite the Taliban’s effective control over the territory of Afghanistan, a significant number of non-state actors continue to operate inside the country. According to the UN, apart from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL-K), whom the Taliban are fighting, “over two dozen groups still operate in the country, enjoying freedom of manoeuvre under the de facto authorities.”⁷ These include Al-Qaida, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and many others. The presence of these and other non-state actors inside Afghanistan is a major factor in shaping the posture of regional and global powers to the Taliban and the crisis in Afghanistan.

Another domestic-level factor is the pre-modern condition of the Afghan polity, characterized by weak state institutions and a weak society. The end goal of an Afghanistan “at

peace with itself and its neighbours and fully reintegrated into the international community”⁸ as endorsed by the UN assessment report can only be achieved through profound changes in the Afghan polity and particularly the nature of state-society relations. However, the Taliban’s strict dogma and their repressive mode of rule preclude such a transformation.

At the **regional level**, we must take into consideration the regional security architecture and Afghanistan’s place within that architecture. In much of the commentary on the crisis in Afghanistan, the country’s immediate and near neighbors are casually referred to as the ‘region.’ The implicit assumption often is that this ‘region’ possesses single-actor qualities or is at least capable of collective action in the face of the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan.

At the regional level, we must take into consideration the regional security architecture and Afghanistan’s place within that architecture.

However, from a security perspective, it is crucial to note that Afghanistan is surrounded by four distinct regional security complexes (RSCs): the China-centered East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Russia-centered complex to the north which includes Central Asia.

In their comprehensive study of the international security structure, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver define an RSC as “a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another.”⁹ A key feature of RSCs is that “processes of securitisation...are more intense between the actors inside such complexes than they are between actors inside the complex and those outside it.”¹⁰ Whether Afghanistan falls within any of these RSCs or outside of them has crucial implications for how regional states respond to the situation in the country.

Writing in 2003, Buzan and Wæver argued that Afghanistan functioned as an insulator among three RSCs— South Asia, the Middle East, and the Russia-centered complex to the north which includes Central Asia.¹¹ They define an insulator as “a location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back.” They also differentiate an insulator from a buffer state, “whose function is defined by standing at the center of a strong pattern of securitisation, not at its edge.”¹² In this view, Afghanistan has transitioned from a buffer state in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to an insulator state since the second half of the twentieth century.

Another factor shaping the responses of regional states to the crisis in Afghanistan is the character of the RSCs—or patterns of amity-enmity within them. Two of the RSCs surrounding Afghanistan—the Middle East and South Asia— are conflict-formations, where interstate relations are defined by “fear of war and expectations of the use of violence.”

The Russian-centered RSC is a security regime, where fears of war and expectations of the use of violence in political relations “are restrained by agreed sets of rules of conduct.” The China-centered East Asia RSC shows features of both conflict formation and security regime.¹³

The major **global level** actors in connection with the situation in Afghanistan are the United States and its major competitors, particularly Russia and China. The collective approach envisioned by the UN requires close cooperation between the US and other major western powers, on the one hand, and regional powers (including Russia and China), on the other. Mutual animosity and distrust between the two sides at the moment make such cooperation unlikely—if not impossible altogether. The United Nations sanctions regime, which is likely to remain in place given the Taliban’s obduracy and their track record since returning to power, further complicates the situation.

Engagement Amid Rivalry

Despite their current policy of engagement with the Taliban, geopolitical rivalries among regional states preclude effective joint action at the regional level for resolving the crisis in Afghanistan. Neighboring countries have different interests and priorities in the country. These rivalries have played a significant part in shaping the course of events in Afghanistan since the 1970s and they will continue to undermine

the emergence of effective joint regional initiatives to tackle the crisis in the country.

Afghanistan’s position within the regional security architecture helps explain—at least in part—the neighboring powers’ approach to the crisis in the country. The Taliban’s return to power in Kabul is in line with the strategic interests of Pakistan and China. However, it goes against many of the interests of Iran, Russia and India—the three states which supported the anti-Taliban forces during the 1990s when the Taliban first emerged and came to power.

Pakistani authorities have been increasingly irritated by what they claim to be the Taliban’s toleration of, or even support for, the TTP fighters inside Afghanistan.

Pakistan views and defines the situation in Afghanistan—at least in part—in terms of its rivalry with India, its arch-foe within the South Asian RSC. Over the past several decades, it has sought to steer ‘Pakistan-friendly’ groups to power in Kabul to counter India’s influence in what it considers its ‘backyard.’ Its role in creating the Taliban in the 1990s and in supporting the group ever since is well known.¹⁴ Pakistan’s support for the Taliban does not change Afghanistan’s insulator position as described above.



U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to the 10th Mountain Division stand security at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan, August 15. U.S. Soldiers and Marines are assisting the Department of State with an orderly drawdown of designated personnel in Afghanistan. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Isalah Campbell)

After their initial euphoria about the Taliban’s return to power in Kabul, Pakistani authorities have been increasingly irritated by what they claim to be the Taliban’s toleration of, or even support for, the TTP fighters inside Afghanistan. In a September 2024 UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s representative claimed that his country had “hard evidence that at least some of the TTP’s cross-border infiltration and attacks are being facilitated by elements of the Afghan interim Government.” He added that “the TTP also obtains sponsorship from Pakistan’s major adversary.”¹⁵

Such Pakistani concerns notwithstanding, a political arrangement in which the Taliban would share power with other Afghan groups—as is implied in calls by many countries and the UN for the formation of a representative government—would undermine Pakistan’s maximalist policy

in Afghanistan. An inclusive political arrangement would diminish its influence in Afghanistan and weaken its position vis-à-vis other states in the region, notably India and Iran. Pakistan is, therefore, unlikely to meaningfully cooperate in any collective effort aimed at weakening the position of its proxy in Afghanistan.

Although perhaps relieved to see the departure of US forces from Afghanistan, for its part China is concerned that extremist groups in Afghanistan could threaten China or its economic interests in the region. It expects the Taliban to suppress the ETIM and to protect Chinese interests in Afghanistan. China has voiced its support for the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor to Afghanistan.¹⁶ It could rely on the cooperation of its ally, Pakistan, to protect its interests in Afghanistan.¹⁷ But repeated attacks against Chinese

interests and citizens inside Pakistan have cast doubt over the latter's ability in securing Chinese economic interests within its own borders, let alone in Afghanistan.

China is unlikely to put any pressure on the Taliban to change its domestic policies or to form a more representative government. Despite voicing support for "moderate and prudent governance in Afghanistan," the Chinese government has declared that it "respects the religious beliefs and national customs of Afghanistan" and that it "never interferes in Afghanistan's internal affairs." China has made it clear that it only "hopes" that Afghanistan could "build an open and inclusive political structure."¹⁸ Chinese officials have also argued that the international community should adopt "a rational and pragmatic perspective," that it should support the Afghans in choosing a path "suited to their national conditions" and "encourage and guide" them "to eventually build a broad and inclusive political structure."¹⁹

While there is nothing surprising about the reactions of Pakistan and China to the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the responses of India, Russia and Iran do come as a surprise. These states supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in the 1990s and had close relations with the former Afghan government. Two major factors explain the responses of these countries to the Taliban. The first has to do with the strategic priorities of these states. As we will see below, all three have their strategic attention elsewhere. The second—and this is especially true of Iran and Russia—is that these states no longer view the Taliban as the major threat from Afghanistan. They both seem to have calculated that they must work with the Taliban to counter what

they consider a bigger menace—ISIL-K.

Iran considers the Taliban—a Sunni extremist group—a potential security threat. It supported the anti-Taliban forces in the 1990s and provided the United States intelligence and diplomatic support in the early stages of the latter's invasion of Afghanistan and in the subsequent Bonn conference in 2001, which laid the foundation for Afghanistan's political arrangement after the removal of the Taliban from power.

Iran considers the Taliban—a Sunni extremist group—a potential security threat.

Iran, however, adopted a dual policy soon afterwards. On the one hand, it supported the US-backed Afghan government; on the other, it established links with and gave some support to segments of the Taliban to counter the US threat on its eastern doorsteps. Iran-Taliban contacts intensified from 2015 onwards, after the emergence of a common enemy in Afghanistan—ISIL-K. Iran considers ISIL-K a bigger menace, a fact which explains its current posture toward the Taliban. Its courting of the Taliban is aimed at countering the threat of ISIL-K, a policy Iran is unlikely to abandon as long as that threat remains active.²⁰

Another factor that explains Iran's posture toward the Taliban is



Anna Evstigneeva, Deputy Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations, addresses the Security Council meeting on the situation in Afghanistan, September 2021. (UN Photo/Ariana Lindquist)

the fact that its strategic attention is elsewhere. Iran is a major power within the Middle East RSC, which is characterized by conflict-formation as we noted above. For the past several decades, Iran's strategic attention has been toward its western and southern borders to counter its arch-foes within the Middle Eastern RSC, Israel and Saudi Arabia. This explains Iran's aversion to getting entangled in Afghanistan now.

Russia finds itself in a situation similar to that of Iran. Although concerned about potential security threats from Afghanistan, its strategic focus is on the war with Ukraine and on its position within the post-Soviet space. Russia, too, considers ISIL-K a bigger menace than the Taliban. Its courting of the Taliban is aimed primarily at countering ISIL-K, but also other extremist groups such as Jamaat Ansarullah and the IMU, which have their origins in, and could pose a threat to, Central Asian states.²¹

Despite its overtures to the Taliban over the past several years, Russia does appear to be concerned about the group's monopoly of power in Afghanistan. In this regard, Russia's position is like that of Iran, which has also insisted on the formation of a representative government in Kabul. In March 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that "the new Kabul government does not fully represent all sections of Afghan society, and we see this as the main obstacle for official recognition."²²

The collapse of the former Afghan government dealt a major blow to Indian interests in Afghanistan. India had cordial relations with Kabul and was seeking to bolster its position in the country through significant economic aid and cultural and educational programs. With the Taliban's return to power, India appeared to have effectively ceded Afghanistan to its regional adversaries, Pakistan and China. India is particularly

concerned that Pakistani extremist groups Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed may find a haven in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

India has sought to pursue some limited engagement with the Taliban; notably, it reopened its embassy in Kabul in July 2022. India's about-face vis-à-vis the Taliban might be in part due to shifts in balance of power within the South Asian RSC. India, increasingly more assured of its dominant position within the South Asian RSC, appears to be focused less on its rivalry with Pakistan and more on pursuing its ambitions for great power status. It may have also calculated that direct engagement with the Taliban might be more helpful in mitigating security threats from Afghanistan.

Regional Institutional Deficit

A second implication of the regional security architecture is that the region lacks the institutional capacity to facilitate the sort of collective action required for dealing with the crisis in Afghanistan. There are several mechanisms, platforms and institutions, through which regional states seek to coordinate their actions in relation to Afghanistan. These include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Foreign Ministers' Meetings among Afghanistan's neighboring countries, the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, and the Informal Meeting of China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran Foreign Ministers on

Afghanistan.

These regional forums and platforms, however, include actors with competing geopolitical interests in Afghanistan as well as different current priorities and entanglements in their respective RSCs. These rivalries and divergencies, which manifest themselves in the multiplicity of initiatives and their membership, render these regional mechanisms ineffective in facilitating joint action. The region remains a multi-polar arena with limited capacity for effective collective action to address what is claimed to be a threat to all.

The region lacks the institutional capacity to facilitate the sort of collective action required for dealing with the crisis in Afghanistan.

For instance, the SCO was once thought to be the leading regional mechanism for addressing the crisis in Afghanistan and was established in part in reaction to the security threats emanating from there. According to Article 1 of the SCO charter, one of the main goals of that organization is "to jointly counteract terrorism, separatism and extremism."²³ In 2005, the Afghanistan Contact Group was created inside the SCO, but its activity was suspended four years later. Although the contact group was revived in 2017 and held annual meetings afterwards, it failed to produce any action plan in response to the situation in

Afghanistan. Key SCO members such as Russia and China and would-be member Iran established contacts with the Taliban well before the fall of the former Afghan government. Another would-be member, Pakistan, was the main sponsor of the Taliban since the group's emergence on the Afghan political scene.

Yet, in September 2021, twenty years after the SCO's establishment, member states declared once again that "one of the most important factors in preserving and strengthening security and stability in the SCO space is the earliest possible settlement of the situation in Afghanistan."²⁴ Competing priorities and internal geopolitical rivalries will most likely prevent the SCO from delivering joint action in response to the crisis in Afghanistan.²⁵

Within the SCO there is competition between Russia and China, for example. Russia would like to remain the leading security guarantor in its respective RSC—that is, the post-Soviet space including Central Asia. Russia's stance runs against China's ambitions to expand its influence in Central Asia. It appears that Russia prefers to rely on the Moscow Format and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to respond to the situation in Afghanistan. However, CSTO, rather than resolving the crisis in Afghanistan—which is beyond its capacity anyway—is focused more on securing its members against potential threats from the country. A June 2023 CSTO foreign ministers meeting underlined the importance of "creating a security belt around Afghanistan," adding that they could consider involving the non-members Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in CSTO's activities regarding Afghanistan.²⁶

The enlargement of the SCO has further eroded its internal cohesion.²⁷

The addition of Pakistan and India in 2017 and Iran in 2021 has increased the number of regional heavyweights within the grouping, making it even more difficult for the regional organization to respond effectively to the crisis in Afghanistan. In the most recent SCO summit held in Pakistan in October 2024, the Pakistani prime minister proposed the expansion of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into an SCO connectivity scheme. The Indian foreign minister, whose country has long opposed the CPEC on the grounds that it passes through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, retorted that "if activities across borders are characterised by terrorism, extremism and separatism, they are hardly likely to encourage trade, energy flows, connectivity and people-to-people exchanges in parallel."²⁸ It is also hard to imagine how China and India might be able to work together under the SCO umbrella. These geopolitical rivalries have practically rendered the SCO ineffective with respect to the crisis in Afghanistan.

Of course, the situation in Afghanistan is not solely a regional issue, which means that the crisis really is beyond the competence of a regional institution such as the SCO. The Taliban and other extremist groups operating in Afghanistan are subject to international sanctions by the UN Security Council and the US. The resolution of the crisis, therefore, requires that regional powers and the US can find a way to work with one another. However, as we will explain below, this is unlikely in the current global geopolitical climate.

Global Geopolitical Rivalries

Geopolitical rivalries between major powers in the region and the United States is another factor that hinders effective international cooperation on the crisis in Afghanistan. In terms of levels of analysis, here we see once again the interaction among actors situated at the domestic, regional and global levels. Despite withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan, the United States, as a global actor, remains an important—perhaps the most important—player in the country.

American declared policy in Afghanistan post-withdrawal is founded on two pillars: counterterrorism and support for the Afghan people—which includes human rights and humanitarian assistance.²⁹ The Taliban and the Haqqani Network—a semiautonomous affiliate of the group—are on the U.S. list of specially designated terrorist groups, with the latter also designated as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).³⁰ The presence of global terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, in particular Al-Qaida and ISIL-K, is another factor shaping American response to the situation in the country. When the Taliban captured the Afghan state, the Biden administration decided to freeze the assets of Afghanistan’s central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), held in the US.³¹

How these policy decisions may affect the economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and the prospects for stabilizing the country has been a point of controversy both

within and outside the United States. In an effort to reconcile counterterrorism with support for the Afghan people, the US government has issued exceptions³² to the sanctions and has also moved half of the DAB assets to a fund in Switzerland theoretically to provide macroeconomic stability for the Afghan economy (and to protect those funds from a US-based lawsuit brought by families of 9/11 victims). The United States also continues to be the largest donor to humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan.³³

Geopolitical rivalries between major powers in the region and the United States is another factor that hinders effective international cooperation on the crisis in Afghanistan.

However, regional powers have opposed the US sanctions on the Taliban and its freezing of the DAB assets, calling these moves “unilateral” and “illegal.” In October 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister told a G20 meeting that countries “still imposing unilateral sanctions on Afghanistan should lift the sanctions as soon as possible.”³⁴ In March 2022, Russia demanded that the US return to Afghanistan what it termed “illegally confiscated Afghan national assets.”³⁵ In a joint statement in April 2023, the foreign ministers of China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran called on Western powers to “instantly lift unilateral sanctions against Afghanistan and return its overseas



On September 29, 2023 Kazan hosted the fifth meeting of the Moscow format on Afghanistan with the participation of special representatives and senior officials from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Representatives of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye also attended the meeting as invited parties. Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi took part in the meeting. (india.mid.ru)

assets.”³⁶ The representatives of these states have often repeated such statements during the UN Security Council meetings on Afghanistan.³⁷

Regional powers have also raised doubts about the US counterterrorism policy and its intentions in Afghanistan. China has argued that the international community should abandon “double standards and selective counterterrorism.”³⁸ This could be a reaction to the United States’ delisting of the ETIM. The US had initially listed the ETIM in 2002, but the State Department delisted the group in 2020, arguing that “for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist.”³⁹

Both Russia and China have warned, without proof being offered, against what they see as American plans to deploy military force inside

states in the region, in particular in Central Asia. China has declared that “relevant countries should not attempt to re-deploy military facilities in Afghanistan and its neighbourhood.”⁴⁰ Likewise, in 2022, Russia warned against the “deployment of any US or NATO military infrastructure or their Afghan personnel in neighbouring states, first of all, in Central Asia.”⁴¹ Such warnings have been repeated ever since.⁴² In fact, soon after the US announced its intention to fully withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, Russia cautioned both the American government and Central Asian states against American military presence in the region.⁴³

In March 2022, Russia’s foreign minister accused the US of using its influence within the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to “put the brakes on efforts by the Kabul authorities to carry out social

programs.” He also accused the West of “striving to use the UN flag and the UN Secretariat for creating artificial competition in international and regional efforts as regards Afghanistan.” He went on to argue that regional countries should “strengthen regional cooperation and come up with consolidated approaches to promoting recovery and normalisation in Afghanistan in all spheres” by relying on regional mechanisms such as the Moscow Format, the SCO and the CSTO.⁴⁴ These statements, which were made shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and perhaps in an effort to deflect international criticism of Russia, show how the intensification of hostilities between great powers affects the prospects for cooperation among them in addressing international crises.

More recently, at a meeting of the “Moscow Format” in 2024, Lavrov was more direct in his views. He called for “caution regarding the United States and its allies’ efforts to force their way into the settlement process with the aim of assuming control, in particular, by using the UN’s prestige for their reprehensible purposes.” He claimed that “the cynical policy of the collective West is pushing the situation in Afghanistan into a dead-end” and that the US and its allies were “hindering the revival of the Afghan state.” He reiterated he was confident that “it is the regional platforms that can attain the results possible by combining their efforts.”⁴⁵

It is, thus, clear that regional powers’ approach to the situation in Afghanistan radically differs from that of the US and its western allies. The least that one can say is that the distrust, hostility and acrimony evident in such statements does not bode well for the emergence of international

cooperation on the crisis in Afghanistan. One well-respected analyst has reported that according to Western diplomats, Russia, Iran, and China have told the Taliban leaders they “should not feel compelled to yield to Western pressure on issues such as women’s rights” and that China can serve as an interlocutor for the Taliban on the international stage.⁴⁶ If this is indeed the case, it is hard to imagine that the Taliban would show much flexibility in the face of internal and external demands for improved governance and respect for rights. Such flexibility, however, is essential for breaking the current impasse.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the preceding pages, in the current geopolitical climate, competition prevails over cooperation when it comes to the situation in Afghanistan. The emergence of a common international approach to the crisis is highly unlikely—if not impossible altogether. Geopolitical rivalries among the country’s neighbors, on the one hand, and between regional powers and the United States, on the other, make the realization of such cooperation untenable at this time.

There is no unified approach to Afghanistan at the regional level. That Afghanistan’s neighbors have adopted a more conciliatory approach to the Taliban is due in part to the presence of other terrorist groups in the country and in part to these countries having more pressing issues to deal with in their respective RSCs. Regional powers have competing geopolitical interests

in Afghanistan, but for the moment they seem to have calculated that by engaging with the Taliban they can preserve a modicum of stability in, and contain or minimize security threats emanating from the country.

The high degree of trust deficit between the regional heavyweights and the United States precludes meaningful international cooperation on the crisis in Afghanistan.

The high degree of trust deficit between the regional heavyweights and the United States precludes meaningful international cooperation on the crisis in Afghanistan. It is evident that, by insisting that the US lift its sanctions on the Taliban and the hold on the DAB assets, regional powers are trying to minimize American leverage in Afghanistan. Regional powers, thus, effectively shield the Taliban from western pressure on issues such as human rights and the formation of a representative government.

Assured of the absence of a united regional or international front against them, the Taliban will likely seek to exploit the rivalry between regional and western powers by playing them against each other. They will continue to enter into quid-pro-quo arrangements with individual states in the region and beyond to withstand demands for changing their domestic

mode of rule. Their intransigence will, in turn, perpetuate the current precarious situation.

No amount of UN-led diplomacy is likely to change the geopolitical realities surrounding the situation in Afghanistan. An analysis of the security constellation—the interplay of factors situated at the domestic, regional and global levels—shows that international cooperation on the crisis in Afghanistan is highly unlikely at present. As the September 2024 UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Afghanistan shows, already there is a good measure of pessimism—both from the UN officials and others—about the prospects for a common international approach to address the crisis in the country. Once again, Afghanistan shows the limits of international diplomacy.



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2 “UN Security Council Resolution 2679,” March 16, 2023, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-03-15_-_res_2679_independent_assessment.pdf.

3 “Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679,” November 9, 2023, 12, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023_11_sg_special_assessment_report.pdf.

4 “Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679,” 20–22.

5 “Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679,” 13.

6 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 51–52; see also Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, “Macrosecuritisation and Security Constellations: Reconsidering Scale in Securitisation Theory,” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 2 (April 2009): 253–376.

7 “Fifteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2716 (2023) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan,” July 8, 2024, 16, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4053880?ln=en&v=pdf>.

8 “Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679,” 13.

9 Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, 491; see also Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997).

10 Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, 4.

11 Buzan and Wæver, 483–88.

12 Buzan and Wæver, 41.

13 Buzan and Wæver, 489–91; 172–82; The

characterization, by Buzan and Wæver, of RSCs as conflict-formation, security regime, or security community is similar to Alexander Wendt’s three cultures of anarchy: Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian. See Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246–312.

14 For background, see for example Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2017); and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 2 edition (Yale University Press, 2010).

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