



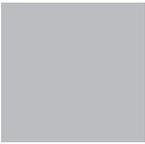
BISHKEK 2013

AFGHANISTAN'S TRANSITION TOWARDS 2014: IMPLICATIONS FOR CENTRAL ASIA

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June 2013

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KEY POINTS

- A full-blown spill-over of Afghanistan's armed conflict into neighbouring Central Asia is unlikely, mainly because the politico-security dynamics affecting Afghanistan are largely divergent from, rather than convergent to, those of Central Asia.
- Indications of growing geographical (north/south) and ethnic (non-Pashtun/Pashtun) divides in Afghanistan's domestic politics are questionable, given the scattered and fragile nature of the northern political opposition, with presently unclear repercussions for neighbouring Central Asia.
- The security situation has been deteriorating in northern Afghanistan, but insurgents of the north, particularly the Taliban, seem not to have Central Asian interests, at least for the time being, apart from seeking to de-stabilise and de-legitimise the current Afghan government.
- The Afghan peace process, which continues to be controversial despite the recent opening of a contentious Taliban political office in Qatar, is hardly connected to Central Asia and is yet another instance of how the dynamics influencing Afghanistan diverge from those affecting neighbouring Central Asia.
- Nevertheless, one should bear in mind and closely monitor whether and how any further drastic deterioration in Afghanistan's politico-security situation will impact neighbouring Central Asia in the future, and whether and how any potential Central Asian turmoil will paradoxically influence Afghanistan in a reverse manner. Finally, one should also continue to examine the evolution of Afghanistan-centred drug production and trafficking and its impact on the region's politico-security dynamics in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The success of Afghanistan's transition towards 2014 is crucial for security and sustained socio-economic development in the country and its neighbourhood, including post-Soviet Central Asia. Senior Afghan government officials have called the year 2014 a 'magical date,' as it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between reality and illusion in the evolving situation,¹ as well as a 'test of Afghanistan's national survival.'² The situation in Afghanistan and, by extension, its Central Asian neighbourhood leading up to and beyond 2014 can perhaps currently be best described as cloudy. It is risky and in various ways premature to make any predictions. Rather, it may be more useful to continue to closely examine what is actually happening in Afghanistan and how that can impact the surrounding region.

At this stage, one can discern two broad and conflictual positions on, or perceptions about, Afghanistan's situation leading up to and beyond 2014. On the one hand, the Afghan government and the West-led international community maintain that the country is 'on track' and spare no effort to defuse an ominously growing and self-defeating sentiment of uncertainty about the future.³ This narrative of assurance is basically a response to those who discuss a re-play of the 1990s, when the then Afghan communist government collapsed in the aftermath of Soviet disengagement.

¹ Alissa J Rubin and Declan Walsh, 'Renewed Push for Afghans to Make Peace with Taliban', *The New York Times*, 16 February 2013; <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/world/asia/pressure-for-peace-with-taliban-is-renewed.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0> (accessed 23 March 2013).

² Meeting with Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, chairperson of Afghanistan's Transition Co-ordination Commission, the body tasked with co-ordinating the 2014 transition, October 2012, Kabul, Afghanistan (attended by this author).

³ Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'Full Text of Speech by Hamed Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, in the First Leadership Conference of the Ministry of National Defence and the Office of Chief of Army Staff', 17 February 2013 (in Dari and Pashtu languages); <<http://president.gov.af/fa/news/17521>> (accessed 27 February 2013); and NATO, 'Closing press conference by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen following the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers', 22 February 2013; <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_98658.htm> (accessed 27 February 2013).

On the other hand, Afghanistan's direct and immediate Central Asian neighbours (excluding Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) and Eurasian regional organisations, particularly the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), have been building an almost apocalyptic narrative about post-2014 Afghanistan – a situation that will 'cause' (in their view) a considerable flow of terrorists, Islamist extremists and drug traffickers northwards, which can seriously threaten stability in an already volatile Central Asian region.⁴

Given this confusing backdrop, this paper seeks to examine recent developments related to Afghanistan's on-going transition and analyse what ramifications, if any, these might have for neighbouring Central Asia. The paper argues that a full-blown spill-over of Afghanistan's armed conflict into Central Asia is unlikely, mainly because the broader politico-security dynamics affecting Afghanistan are divergent from, rather than convergent to, those of Central Asia.

In specific terms, this paper *thematically* focuses on three aspects of Afghanistan's transition: (1) political transition with the coming elections at its core, (2) security transition and (3) the Afghan 'peace' process. It examines the potential repercussions of these three issues for the northern Central Asian neighbourhood and only cursorily touches on economic transition within the larger national political context. In addition, the paper *geographically* focuses on provinces in northern Afghanistan that directly border Central Asia and, in a corresponding manner, on Afghanistan's three neighbouring Central Asian states – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – with which the country shares a frontier totalling around 2,087 km (see figure 1 above).⁵

⁴ For a recent and blatant example, see Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 'Lecture of the CSTO Secretary General Nikolay Bordyuzha at the Russian Embassy on 20 February 2013'; <<http://www.rusemb.org.uk/video/171>> (accessed 27 February 2013). For Central Asian governmental rhetoric on Afghanistan towards 2014, see Said Reza Kazemi, 'A Potential Afghan Spill-Over: How Real Are Central Asian Fears?', Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), 12 December 2012; <<http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=3152>> (accessed 16 June 2013).

⁵ Eight of Afghanistan's 34 provinces border on Central Asia: Herat, Badghis, Faryab and Jowzjan border on Turkmenistan in the north-west and north (744 km), Balkh borders on Uzbekistan (137 km) in the north and Balkh, Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan border on Tajikistan in the north and north-east (1,206 km). Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are further away not only physically but also mentally, although relations between these countries (particularly Kazakhstan) and Afghanistan have been quite considerably expanding since 2001. For the source of figure 1, see University of Texas Libraries, Afghanistan Maps; <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/txu-oclc-309296021-afghanistan_admin_2008.jpg> (accessed 7 April 2013).

AFGHANISTAN'S CRITICAL POLITICAL TRANSITION: AN IRRELEVANT CENTRAL ASIA?

This paper *deliberately* starts its substantive elaboration with the political transition. While much Central Asian regional policy discussion on Afghanistan has been, in one way or another, affected by the fog of war, efforts aimed at enabling Afghan peace talks and the current US/NATO military drawdown through the northern corridor, it is increasingly important to closely study the unfolding political transition in Afghanistan. This is because it is largely the success or failure of the political transition that is key to determining the continuity of Afghanistan as a state and defining its standing and role, whether positive or negative, in the wider region. Domestic political activity has been mounting as the keystone of the political transition – the simultaneous presidential and provincial council elections to be held on 5 April 2014 – is approaching within the next ten months.⁶ Additionally, continued international engagement in and development of co-operation with Afghanistan, which is vital for the government's fiscal viability, hinges on the coming elections.⁷ Suffice it to say that Afghanistan's political transition is decisive.

There are, however, serious concerns about whether and how elections will be conducted. First, the electoral procedural and legal framework continues to be fraught with significant shortcomings. These include controversy over voter registry and the lack of

⁶ According to Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC), voter registration will take place from 26 May to 22 August 2013, followed by candidate nomination and finalisation upon adjudication of challenges against nominations (16 September–16 November), electoral campaign (17 November 2013–2 April 2014) and polling day (5 April 2014). Final results will be declared on 14 May 2014 for presidential elections, if there is no run-off, and on 7 June 2014 for provincial council elections. See IEC, 'IEC Press Statement with regards to the Announcement of 2014 Elections Timeline (31 October 2012)'; <http://www.iec.org.af/pdf/wolesi-pressr/pressr_on_elections_timeline.pdf> (accessed 28 March 2013). It should also be noted that the IEC announced on 25 March 2013 that it had changed the start of voter registration from 21 April to 26 May 2013.

⁷ See, for example, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 'In his report on Afghanistan, UN chief highlights urgent need to conclude groundwork for 2014 polls', 18 June 2013; <<http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=12254&ctl=Details&mid=15756&itemID=36956&language=en-US>> (accessed 18 June 2013).

a fully adopted electoral legal framework. The contention over voter registry stems from the fact that Afghanistan is yet to have an updated voter registry, let alone an accurate census. Around 17.5 million voter cards have been issued in previous elections post-2001, while 'it [is] widely accepted that an excess of five to seven million voter cards [are] not linked to actual voters.'⁸ The proposal of the Afghan Independent Election Commission (IEC) for a new voter registration process has been scrapped by the Afghan cabinet in favour of what is called the *e-tazkera*, or electronic national identity card, plan. Questions, however, over feasibility (due to security and technical reasons), finance (a funding requirement of around \$120 million) and timeliness (at least a decade is needed to complete the *e-tazkera* plan) fundamentally challenge the appropriateness of this alternative for the 2014 poll.⁹ Even a mix of *e-tazkera* distribution (which is yet to start country-wide) and a partially new current voter registration process (which has not been designed to weed out fake or invalid voter cards) is unlikely to prevent the fraud experienced in previous elections or ensure a free and fair election.¹⁰

Furthermore, Afghanistan continues to lack a fully adopted electoral legal framework that can legally and practically ensure the independence of electoral institutions, including the IEC as an administrative body and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) as an adjudicative mechanism. The Law on the Structure, Duties and Mandate of the IEC has been approved by both *Wolesi Jirga* and *Meshrano Jirga*, the lower and upper houses of the Afghan parliament, but remains to be endorsed by the president. Moreover, the Electoral Law has only been approved by *Wolesi Jirga*, but needs to be additionally approved by *Meshrano Jirga* and

⁸ Martine van Bijlert, 'Untangling Afghanistan's 2010 Vote', AAN, Briefing Paper 03/2011, p 4; <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/AAN-2011-Untangling_the_vote.pdf> (accessed 28 March 2013).

⁹ Obaid Ali, 'E-tazkera: relieving pre-election tension or adding to the confusion?' AAN, 7 January 2013; <<http://www.aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=3184>> (accessed 28 March 2013).

¹⁰ According to the revised electoral timetable, the IEC launched voter registration on 26 May 2013. See, for example, TOLONews, 'Voter Registration Begins for 2014 Election', 26 May 2013; <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/10624-voter-registration-begins-for-2014-election>> (accessed 16 June 2013).

finally endorsed by the president.¹¹ The final adoption of the two laws may, broadly speaking, be highly conflictual for at least two reasons. First, both parliamentary houses have agreed that the ECC would remain an independent mechanism for resolving electoral disputes within the Law on the Structure, Duties and Mandate of the IEC, while the government favours the replacement of the ECC by a special court under the Afghan judiciary, which is appointed by the president. In addition, they have agreed that there should be no international members in the ECC composition, contrary to previous practice post-2001 and against demands from at least parts of the political opposition. Second, *Wolesi Jirga* has dissented and dropped the mixed electoral system provision from the Electoral Law, while political parties favour this type of electoral system, which they hope will strengthen political parties in Afghanistan. Furthermore, a new IEC chairperson needs to be selected, as the term of the incumbent, Fazl Ahmad Manawi, already expired on 17 April 2013.

If these election-related developments in Afghanistan are unlikely to affect the Central Asian neighbourhood directly, they constitute the backdrop for emerging pre-election political coalition-building that might have potential consequences for Central Asia more broadly. On the one hand, a significant part of the political opposition and civil society, particularly groups deriving their political clout from the north, are concerned that the incumbent president, Hamed Karzai, might manipulate the electoral framework to ensure a political succession favourable to him and the ruling elite largely centred in the presidential palace.¹² Such manipulation might be accomplished through voter registration, as it affects the timetable and quality of elections, as well as through the two electoral laws and the selection of the new IEC chair. On

¹¹ TOLONews, 'Lawmakers Approve IEC Structure, Complaints Commission Law', 14 April 2013; <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/10139-lawmakers-approves-iec-structure-complaints-commission-law>> (accessed 16 June 2013); and TOLONews, 'qanun-e entekhabat ba aksaryat-e ara ba taswib rasid' ('Electoral law approved by majority'), 22 May 2013 (in Dari language); <<http://www.tolonews.com/fa/afghanistan/10579-election-law-approved-by-the-lower-house->> (accessed 16 June 2013).

¹² See, for example, TOLONews.com, 'Election Day Will Be Catastrophic: Political Parties', 23 September 2012; <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/7686-election-delay-will-be-catastrophic>> (accessed 29 March 2013). Besides, major Afghan political opposition and civil society groups have issued a 'Declaration of Principles for Electoral Reform'.

the other hand, Karzai and others in senior government positions have time and again rejected these allegations by stressing strict adherence to applicable constitutional requirements.¹³

One influential coalition within the political opposition might have particular geographical and ethnic relevance for neighbouring Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, although its relevance is questionable for the time being. The three leaders of *Jabha-ye Melli-ye Afghanistan* (National Front of Afghanistan, NFA) have joined two other northern heavyweights in declaring their intention to back a single candidate in the presidential elections.¹⁴ This single candidate, if agreed upon and supported by other political opposition groups and if the electoral 'national consensus' discourse leads nowhere, might challenge the candidate favoured by the ruling elite around Karzai. In such a case, this can indicate growing geographical (north/south) and ethnic (non-Pashtun/Pashtun) divides in Afghanistan's domestic politics. That is because NFA and its currently declared allies are primarily influential in the north, where Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras form the core NFA constituency in a country where Pashtuns constitute the plurality of the population.¹⁵

¹³ For a recent example, see Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'Full Text of Speech by Hamed Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, in the Inauguration of Third Working Year of the Sixteenth National Assembly', 6 March 2013 (in Dari and Pashtu languages); <<http://president.gov.af/fa/news/18086>> (accessed 29 March 2013).

¹⁴ They include Ahmad Zia Massoud; an ethnic Tajik, former first vice-president and brother of late Ahmad Shah Massoud; Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek and leader of Junbesh-e Melli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan (National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan); Mohammad Mohaqqueq, an ethnic Hazara and leader of Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami-ye Mardom-e Afghanistan (Islamic Unity Party of the People of Afghanistan); Atta Mohammad Nur, an ethnic Tajik and the powerful governor of northern Balkh province; and Amrullah Saleh, an ethnic Tajik and former national security director.

¹⁵ Recent research on northern Afghanistan indicates that the north is 'the most intensely "politically mobilised" region of Afghanistan' along ethno-nationalist, regionalist and other lines, centred primarily at the 'resilient oligopoly' of two most powerful individuals, i.e. Atta and Dostum. See Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Resilient Oligopoly: A Political-Economy of Northern Afghanistan 2001 and Onwards', pp 2 and 29-31, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), December 2012; <<http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/1213E%20Resilient%20Oligopoly%20IP%20Dec%202013.pdf>> (accessed 1 April 2014).

The implications of such a political development for neighbouring Central Asia mainly on the grounds of geographical proximity and cross-border ethnic interaction are currently unclear. What is clear, however, is that the northern ‘strongmen’ have historically rooted relations with neighbouring Central Asian states, particularly with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as evidenced by ties between the Rahmon government and the Massouds and the Karimov regime and Abdul Rashid Dostum throughout recent history. Of all the five Central Asian states, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain most closely linked to events in Afghanistan.

At the same time, there are difficult questions about the integrity and stability of NFA and of the political opposition in general. What binds NFA’s leaders together has more to do with fears about their future politico-economic survival than with a shared political vision such as their stated goal of seeking a more decentralised political system for Afghanistan. This is not to mention some of their previous violent conflicts over power in the north and serious allegations about their involvement in corruption and crime. They supported Karzai in the two previous presidential elections in 2004 and 2009 and there is no guarantee that they might not again line up their ethnically based patronage networks to back a Karzai-favoured candidate in return for political and other compensation. Finally, NFA is not the sole representative of Afghanistan’s non-Pashtun ethnic groups, as the political opposition is highly scattered.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Abdullah Abdullah, an ethnic Tajik and former foreign minister, leads his own political grouping, i.e. the National Coalition of Afghanistan, which also brings together Mohammad Yunus Qanuni, another Tajik heavyweight and former parliament speaker. Qanuni and Abdullah challenged Karzai in 2004 and 2009 presidential elections respectively. Furthermore, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, an ethnic Tajik and first vice-president, Mohammad Karim Khalili, an ethnic Hazara and second vice-president, Besmellah Mohammadi, an ethnic Tajik and minister of defence, Salahuddin Rabbani, son of late Burhanuddin Rabbani and chairperson of the High Peace Council, and Mohammad Ismail, an influential ethnic Tajik in western Afghanistan and minister of energy and water, among others, are presently part of the Karzai administration.*

GROWING INSECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN: 'SPREADING' TO CENTRAL ASIA?

Afghanistan's security transition is at its peak. At the moment, Afghan government troops are reportedly responsible to provide security for about 90 per cent of the population across the country, including the eight provinces bordering on Central Asia (see figure 1 and footnote 5 above) and the fifth and last stage of the security transition was announced on 18 June 2013.¹⁷ This means that combat responsibility has now shifted to Afghan security forces, while US/NATO troops have assumed a supportive role.¹⁸ The transition of security responsibility for the entire country is set to culminate in the end of 2014.

The future of stability and security in Afghanistan, however, remains uncertain. At the core of security-related concerns are significant challenges related to the organisational cohesion and fiscal sustainability of Afghan security forces. Afghan army and police casualties have reportedly increased as a result of greater and recently more effective involvement in combat operations against the armed opposition.¹⁹ At the same time, the rate of de-

¹⁷ *The enteqal, or transition of security responsibility, was decided in NATO's Lisbon summit in November 2010. The Afghan government announced the first, second, third and fourth tranches of transition respectively in July 2011, November 2011, May 2012 and December 2012. See NATO, 'Inteqal: Transition to Afghan Lead'; <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_87183.htm> (accessed 1 April 2013); NATO, 'ISAF Defence Ministers prepare for transition milestone', 22 February 2013; <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-32409CBC-B543F4B5/natolive/news_98737.htm> (accessed 1 April 2013); and Javed Hamim Kakar, 'New era as Afghan forces undertake combat lead', Pajhwok Afghan News (PAN), 18 June 2013; <<http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2013/06/18/new-era-afghan-forces-undertake-combat-lead>> (accessed 18 June 2013).*

¹⁸ *NATO has also called its post-2014 presence in Afghanistan 'Resolute Support'. See NATO, 'NATO Secretary General reviews transition process in Helmand', 5 March 2013; <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_98937.htm> (accessed 1 April 2013). So far at least Russia has publicly objected to post-2014 US/NATO military presence on Afghan soil without an authorisation from the UN Security Council.*

¹⁹ *BBC Persian, 'talafat-e artesh-e Afghanistan 40 darsad afzayesh yafta ast' ('Afghan army casualties have risen 40 per cent'), 20 March 2013 (in Dari language); <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2013/03/130320_ko4_afg_army_casualties.shtml> (accessed 1 April 2013); and BBC Persian, 'afzayesh-e 15 darsadi-ye talafat-e polis-e Afghanistan' ('15 per cent increase in Afghan police casualties'), 18 March 2013 (in Dari language); <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2013/03/130318_k02-police-casualties.shtml> (accessed 1 April 2013).*

sertions in the Afghan army has risen alarmingly, not to mention previous reports about political factionalism and corruption in the military.²⁰ Furthermore, maintaining an approximately 350,000-strong armed force with a reported annual running cost of \$4 billion is not possible for Afghanistan on its own, given its existing economy, and cumbersome for the US and its NATO allies, at least in the long run, given the West's own on-going financial crisis. To address these uncertainties, the Afghan government has largely pinned its hopes on sustained international engagement and support.

There is mounting evidence that some northern Afghan provinces – bordering on Central Asia and among the first provinces that went through the security transition process – have experienced a deteriorating security situation.²¹ The negative trends include stronger insurgent footholds in the north, an increasing number of face-to-face gunfights between the Afghan government and the armed opposition, targeted killings of individuals seen both as anti- and pro-government and growing insecurity on inter-district and inter-provincial roads and highways.²² These might potentially challenge Afghanistan-Central Asia economic co-operation such as the implementation of the recently inaugurated Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway project.²³

²⁰ *TOLONews*, 'salana 63 hazar nezami-ye Afghan tark-e wazifa mikonand' ('63 thousand Afghan troops desert every year'), 31 March 2013 (in Dari language); <<http://tolonews.com/fa/afghanistan/9972-mod-to-focus-on-retaining-ansf-recruits-after-damning-report>> (accessed 1 April 2013); and International Crisis Group (ICG), 'A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army', *Asia Report* 190, 12 May 2010; <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/190%20A%20Force%20in%20Fragments%20-%20Reconstituting%20the%20Afghan%20National%20Army.ashx>> (accessed 1 April 2013).

²¹ Mazar-e Sharif, the capital of Balkh province, went through transition as part of the first tranche in July 2011. The entire Balkh province and Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan province, and Sheberghan, the capital of Jowzjan province, were part of the second tranche in November 2011. In May 2012, all provincial capitals, including the remaining five bordering on Central Asia, were covered by the third tranche. The fourth tranche, announced in December 2012, brought additional areas in northern Afghanistan under transition.

²² See also Antonio Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, 'The Insurgents of the Afghan North', AAN; <<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/uploads/AAN-2011-Northern-Insurgents.pdf>> (accessed 1 April 2013); and Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, 'Quarterly Data Report Q. 1 2013'.

²³ Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'President Karzai Leaves for Turkmenistan to Inaugurate Railway Project between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan', 5 June 2013; <<http://president.gov.af/en/news/21026>> (accessed 17 June 2013).

Badakhshan and Faryab are two clear examples of the worsening security situation in northern Afghanistan. Having established their bases in Warduj and adjacent districts in Badakhshan, insurgents have been clashing heavily with Afghan security forces in early and mid-2013, with contradictory reports about casualties on both sides. The Afghan government has also alleged that Taliban activity in Warduj had been 'planned and directly led by foreigners' from Chechnya, Pakistan and Kazakhstan and by members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).²⁴ It is, however, unclear if the recent insurgency in Warduj is related to domestic sources of frustration with bad governance in Afghanistan, control of drug trafficking trade and routes, or foreign sources of extremism and terrorism. In Faryab, the Taliban have reportedly established footholds in Almar, Ghurmach, Qaisar, Qaramqol and parts of Pashtun Kot districts and have launched attacks against pro-government targets. Moreover, inter-district roads such as Maimana-Ghurmach and inter-provincial highways such as Faryab-Jowzjan are increasingly unsafe.²⁵

These developments, however, do not necessarily mean an all-out spill-over of Afghanistan's conflict into Central Asia. At least three reasons for scepticism of such a prediction stand out. First, insurgents in northern Afghanistan, including the Taliban and a multiplicity of other groups and actors, seem not to have broader Central Asian interests, at least for the time being. Their primary aims are focused on de-stabilising the country and de-legitimising the current Afghan government. Although previous research had identified some presence of the IMU in northern Afghanistan, particularly in Balkh, Faryab and Kunduz, recent research indicates that this presence has decreased due to the IMU's friction with the Taliban.²⁶ Second, the challenges to security and stability in broader Central Asia seem to be more home-grown (due to bad

²⁴ Azadi Radio, 'Weesa: amaliat-e Taliban dar Warduj ra kharejiha rahbari mikardand' ('Weesa: Foreigners led Taliban operation in Warduj'), 4 April 2014; <<http://da.azadiradio.org/content/article/24949776.html>> (accessed 7 April 2013).

²⁵ Obaid Ali, 'Moving East in the North: Transitioned Faryab and the Taliban', AAN, 17 May 2013; <<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=3401>> (accessed 17 June 2013).

²⁶ Giustozzi and Reuter, 'Insurgents of Afghan North', pp 20-21; and Giustozzi, 'Resilient Oligopoly', p 48.

governance, repressive state behaviour, under-development) than tied to Afghanistan.²⁷ Third, looking at recent history, at the peak of the conflict between the then Taliban regime and the Northern Alliance in the 1990s, actual Afghan spill-over into neighbouring Central Asia was limited and in part politically motivated by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.²⁸

Nonetheless, one should remember and closely examine whether and how any further drastic deterioration in Afghanistan's politico-security situation, due for instance to a failed presidential election in early April 2014, might have de-stabilising ramifications for Central Asia before the end of 2014. One should also consider and whether and how any potential Central Asian crisis, resulting, for example, from looming political succession in Uzbekistan (or Kazakhstan) and growing Tajikistani-Uzbekistani tensions might paradoxically impact Afghanistan in a reverse manner. Additionally, one should keep monitoring how the dynamics of drug production in Afghanistan and drug trafficking in the wider region will evolve in the short and long run, and whether this will more significantly influence the political and security circumstances in Afghanistan and its neighbourhood, including Central Asia²⁹.

²⁷ Neil Melvin, 'Don't Oversell "Overspill": Afghanistan and Emerging Conflicts in Central Asia', *Central Asia Policy Brief 6*, Central Asia Programme, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, December 2012.

²⁸ Said Reza Kazemi, 'A Potential Afghan Spill-Over: How Real Are Central Asian Fears?' *AAN*, 12 December 2012; <<http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=3152>> (accessed 5 April 2013).

²⁹ According to the most recent UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, Afghanistan continues to be the world's largest cultivator of opium (74 per cent of global illicit opium production in 2012). See UNODC, 'World Drug Report 2013', p x; <<http://www.unodc.org/wdr/>> (accessed 27 June 2013).

AFGHANISTAN'S PEACE PROCESS: CONTROVERSIAL BUT LARGELY UNCONNECTED TO CENTRAL ASIA

Efforts for achieving reconciliation in Afghanistan seemed to have made a breakthrough on 18 June 2013 when the Taliban finally opened a political office to engage in peace negotiations in the Qatari capital of Doha.³⁰ The peace process, however, continues to be controversial, as the Afghan government responded the following day that it would not send its delegates to the Gulf country and that it would suspend talks over the US-Afghan security pact.³¹ The fact is that the two major internal parties to the conflict (i.e., the Afghan government and the Taliban) have fundamental differences. The Afghan government has emphasised at least three requirements for reconciliation with the armed opposition: it should (1) recognise the Afghan Constitution, (2) lay down its arms and (3) sever its ties with terrorism.³² For the Taliban, this means 'surrender', not 'peace.' For their part, the Taliban view the Afghan government led by Karzai as 'illegitimate' and regard the coming elections as 'not a useful process' because 'the electoral plan has been conceived during the aggression and will be implemented during the occupation,' that is to say, the intervention of the US-led coalition post-2001.³³ It is extremely difficult to

³⁰ Sharif Ameri, 'Taliban's Political Office Opened in Qatar', TOLONews, 18 June 2013; <<http://tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/10901-talibans-political-office-opened-in-qatar>> (accessed 19 June 2013).

³¹ Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'ta zamanike proce-ye solh kamelan Afghani nabashad, shura-ye ali-ye solh dar mozakerat-e Qatar sherkat namikonad' ('Unless the peace process is fully Afghanised, the High Peace Council will not participate in Qatar negotiations'), 19 June 2013 (in Dari language); <<http://president.gov.af/fa/news/21511>> (accessed 19 June 2013); and Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'Afghanistan Suspends Current Afghan-US Talks on Bilateral Security Agreement', 19 June 2013; <<http://president.gov.af/en/news/statement-by-the-office-of-the-national-security-council>> (accessed 19 June 2013).

³² BBC Persian, 'dawlat-e Afghanistan: sharayet-e solh ba Taliban moshakhkhas ast' ('Afghan government: conditions for peace with the Taliban are clear'), 23 December 2012 (in Dari language); <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2012/12/121223_zs_afghan_gov_reaction_paris_conference.shtml> (accessed 6 April 2013).

³³ See full English text of a recent official Taliban statement in Thomas Ruttig, 'Qatar, Islamabad, Chantilly, Ashgabad: Taliban Talks Season Again? (amended)' (with input from this author), AAN, 31 December 2012; <<http://www.aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=3169>> (accessed 6 April 2013).

bridge these diametrically opposed positions and their underlying interests. The Afghan government is also worried about the Qatar office being used by the Taliban to gain legitimacy as a government-in-exile. The Taliban actually opened the office under the title 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', referring to their rule of Afghanistan in the 1990s. The Taleban insignia were, however, removed from their office in Qatar as a result of furious protests by the Afghan government.

There are other difficult complications as well. Nationally, there is no domestic consensus on reconciliation and its limits. Major parts of the Afghan political opposition have expressed not only their frustration with but also their hostility towards the armed opposition, mainly due to unceasing insurgent attacks particularly in recent months. In addition, civil society organisations are particularly concerned about the effects of reconciliation on Afghanistan's gains in the areas of democratisation and human rights, particularly women's rights. Regionally, bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan – widely believed as having the access key to the Taliban leadership – have recently hit a new low, with both sides lashing out at each other for supporting insurgents on each other's soil.³⁴ Pakistan's obstructionist behaviour largely stems from its fears of India's growing influence in Afghanistan. This then opens up the perspective to rivalries and conflicts between/among other regional and global actors, with the ultimate effect of increasing uncertainty for peace in Afghanistan.

The Afghan peace process is hardly related to neighbouring Central Asia, but this could affect the way the region's different governments perceive and respond to Afghanistan's evolving situation. As the armed conflict between the Afghan government and the armed opposition is likely to continue, the Central Asian governments, particularly neighbouring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan,

³⁴ Michael Georgy and Hamid Shalizi, 'Exclusive: Afghanistan says ready to work for peace without Pakistan help', 27 March 2013; <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/27/us-afghanistan-pakistan-idUSBRE92Q0CQ20130327>> (accessed 6 April 2013); and Fakhar Rehman, 'Pakistan intelligence agency claims Afghanistan supports Taliban splinter groups', 27 March 2013; <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/03/27/17474913-pakistan-intelligence-agency-claims-afghanistan-supports-taliban-splinter-groups> (accessed 6 April 2013).

might increasingly resort to adopting a defensive posture vis-a-vis Afghanistan, rather than engage in greater bilateral or multilateral regional co-operation with the country. Neighbouring Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been further fortifying their borders and restricting interactions with Afghanistan, particularly at a public level. For its part, the Afghan government not only does not favour Central Asian hedging behaviour, but also struggles to supplant it with greater regional co-operation under the Afghanistan-focused 'Heart of Asia' (or Istanbul) Process – a process that has had only haphazard and mainly bilateral results so far.³⁵

Furthermore, the Afghan peace process is largely connected to neighbouring Pakistan rather than to the Central Asian region, because Central Asia has little leverage to exert on the Afghan armed opposition. This can most vividly be seen in so far un-heeded proposals put forward by neighbouring Central Asian states to facilitate a conflict de-escalation or resolution process in Afghanistan. Most recently, Turkmenistan's initiative, in co-operation with UN missions in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and Central Asia (UNRC-CA), aimed at facilitating intra-Afghan peace talks in its capital Ashgabat, was set aside as a result of opposition from the Afghan government. The Afghan government feared that the initiative might grant greater legitimacy to the armed opposition.

³⁵ Said Reza Kazemi, 'Over-promising, Under-delivering: The Outcome of the Afghanistan Conference in Kazakhstan,' AAN, 30 April 2013; <<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=3372>> (accessed 17 June 2013).



CONCLUSION

The situation in Afghanistan and, by extension, its Central Asian neighbourhood leading up to and beyond 2014 is confusing and complex. Rather than making any predictions on how well or poorly things might go, it is rather useful to continue to closely examine what is actually happening in Afghanistan and how that can impact the neighbourhood. Hence, this paper has sought to examine recent developments related to Afghanistan's on-going transition and peace process and analyse their ramifications for neighbouring Central Asia.

This paper has argued that a full-blown spill-over of Afghanistan's conflict into neighbouring Central Asia is unlikely, mainly because the broader politico-security dynamics affecting Afghanistan are largely divergent from, rather than convergent to, those of Central Asia. Within the political transition, with the coming 5 April 2014 presidential elections at its core, indications of widening geographical (north/south) and ethnic (non-Pashtun/Pashtun) divides in Afghanistan's domestic politics are questionable, as the northern Afghan political opposition is thus far anything but unified and stable. This makes political repercussions for neighbouring Central Asia currently unclear. With regard to the security transition, although northern Afghanistan has been experiencing negative security trends, insurgents in the north, particularly the Taliban, seem not to have Central Asian interests, at least for the time being, insofar as those interests are unrelated to their primary aims of destabilising Afghanistan and de-legitimising its current government. Moreover, the Afghan 'peace' process continues to be controversial and is largely unconnected to Central Asia, but can affect the way the region's governments perceive and respond to Afghanistan's evolving situation.

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind and closely monitor whether and how any further drastic deterioration in Afghanistan's politico-security situation (due, for example, to a failed presidential election in early April 2014) will impact neighbouring Central

Asia, and whether and how any potential Central Asian turmoil (because of looming political succession in Uzbekistan/Kazakhstan and growing Tajikistani-Uzbekistani tensions, for instance) will paradoxically influence Afghanistan in a reverse manner. Finally, one should also examine how Afghanistan-centred drug production and trafficking will evolve and affect the region's politico-security dynamics in the future.

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